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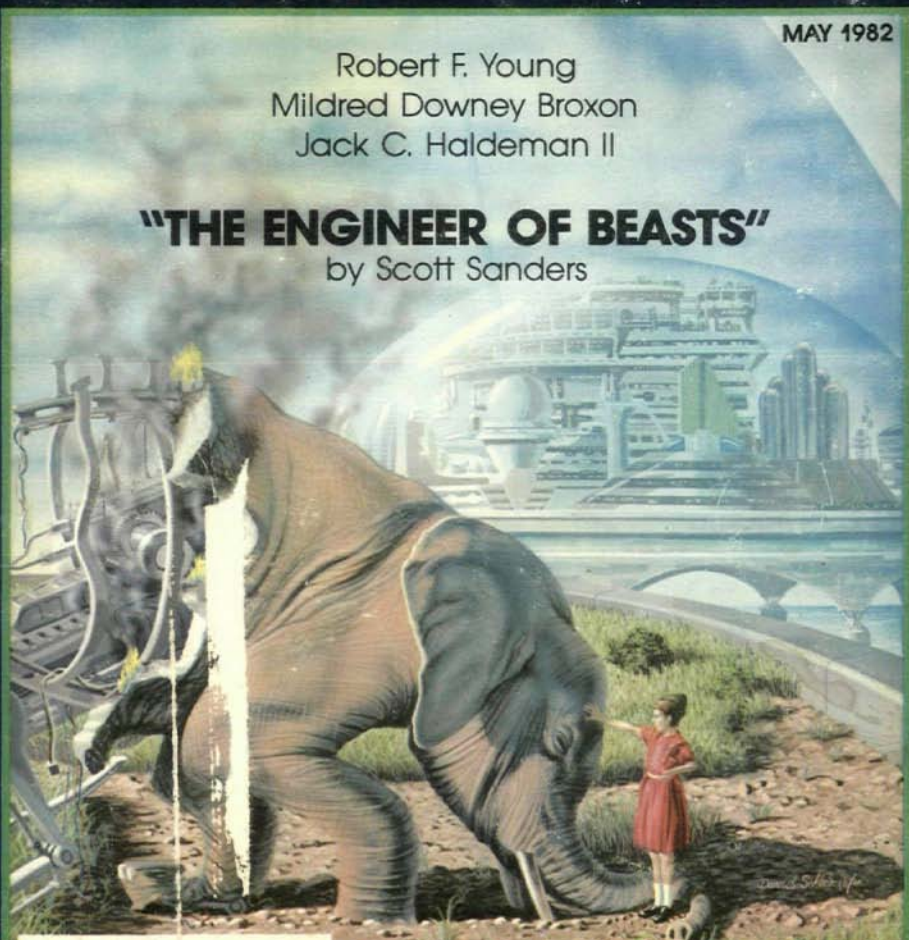

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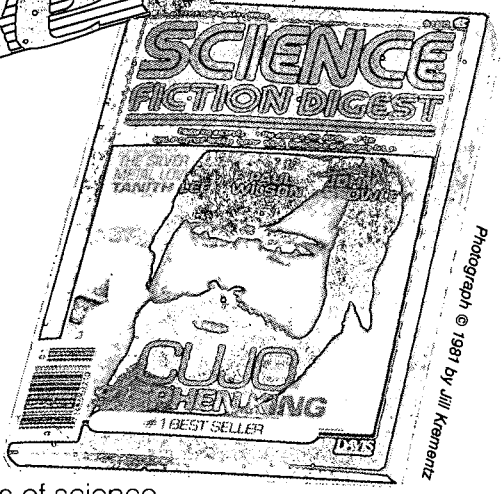

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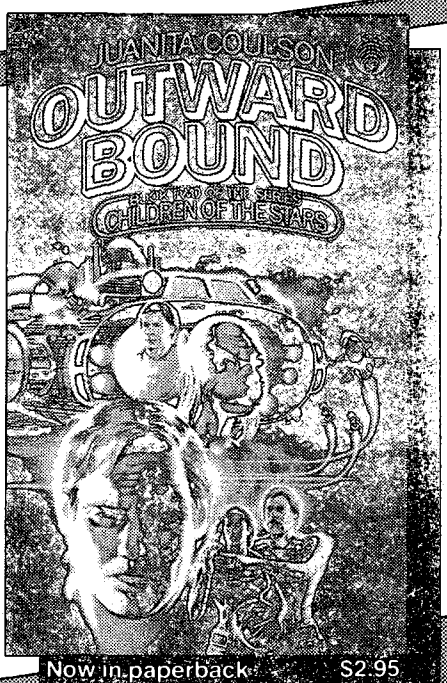

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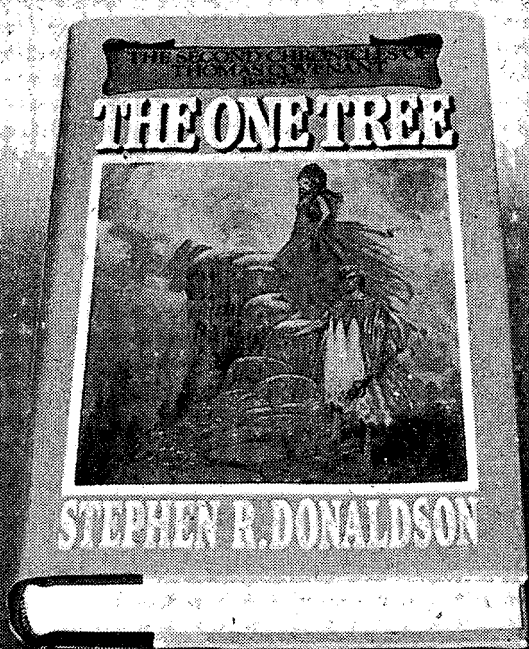

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EDITORIAL:
FAREWELL TO GEORGE

by Isaac Asimov

photo: Roy Schneider

Six years ago, Joel Davis and I, pondering over the new magazine we were planning, realized that the key and linchpin of the entire enterprise was the editor.

Since it was clear that I could not be the editor myself. I did not have the know-how to be an editor. I did not have the time to be an editor. I did not have the desire to be an editor.

If, however, we were going to select an editor other than myself, he would have to fulfill certain criteria. First, he would have to have editing experience; second, he would have to know, understand, and love science fiction; third, his view of science fiction would have to be roughly comparable to my own; fourth, he would have to be willing to run the risk of having his personality drowned by the presence of my name in the title of the magazine.

I chose George Scithers. He met all the criteria. What is more, I knew him personally, both through our meetings at science fiction conventions, and because we were fellow-members of the Trap-Door Spiders (the real-life equivalent of my fictional Black Widowers.)

I spoke to him and he was willing. Joel met him in conference and the two had a meeting of minds. All was set, and toward the end of 1976, there appeared on the stands the Spring 1977 issue (Volume 1, Number 1) of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.*

There was a certain amount of cynicism expressed among some science fiction personalities at the time. After all, since the appearance of the first issue of *Galaxy,* seventeen years before, no new science fiction magazine (and there had been a considerable number) had endured for very many issues. The editor of one prominent

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science fiction fan magazine coolly prophesied that we would last six issues.

That was possible, of course. There are many reasons for a short life that have nothing to do with the quality of a magazine: undercapitalization, problems of distribution, the damage done by inflation, the difficulties of getting stories from prestige-laden veterans who are overburdened with conflicting commitments.

Consequently, if *Asimov's* had indeed lasted only six issues, I would have felt sad, but I would not have felt disgraced.

As a matter of fact, however, we have now lasted 52 issues, have long since moved from four issues a year to thirteen, and within half a year will be putting out our sixth anniversary issue. Furthermore, Joel is pleased enough with *Asimov's* to have raised his sights. A couple of years ago he bought *Analog,* and is now busily expanding his fiction line, including the new *Science Fiction Digest.*

And yet at the same time that *Asimov's* was born, several other SF magazines saw the light of day in a kind of mini-boom, and of them all, only *Asimov's* survived.

How come?

That Joel had faith in the magazine and was steadily willing to risk a continuing investment in it meant worlds, but Joel is a sensible entrepreneur who cannot throw money away uselessly, and drive himself out of business. He could not have continued his support if he had not seen hard-headed reason to do so.

That my name is on the magazine may have helped; Joel and George both insist it does. There is no way of proving this, however, and I have always had the uneasy feeling that it hinders—that among our potential readers are those who back off because they resent what seems to them to be an exploitation of my name and a mercenary willingness on my part to allow it; or by the light-hearted tone I insist on giving the magazine; or by what they consider my "giant ego." There may even be writers who are reluctant to write for a magazine that publicizes one who, after all, is merely a fellow-writer.

But, then, if not Joel and not I, who is responsible for success?

Only one answer is possible: George Scithers!

I am very proud that I selected him as editor. It was the single best decision I made in connection with the magazine.

George threw himself into the job of editing the magazine with a single-minded and devouring interest that caught even me by surprise. He collected stories, labored over questions of magazine design and artwork, helped beat out contract arrangements that

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satisfied both the business department and the writers (no easy task), and established lines of communication with both writers and fans.

After only seven issues of the magazine had appeared, George won a Hugo as "Best Editor" and two years later, he won a second Hugo.

It was he who made another crucial decision, for it was he who found and hired Shawna McCarthy as second-in-command. She is (in increasing order of importance) attractive, lovable, and intelligent. What is more, she quickly proved that her single-minded devotion to the magazine is as great as that of George.

And now, alas, George is leaving us.

Why? As the news reached science fiction fandom generally, it was inevitable that guesses be made concerning various kinds of unpleasantness, but *not so*.

In six years, George and I have not had a cross word. We have seen eye to eye in everything. There have been times when I urged him to be more diplomatic with well-established writers, and there have been times when he strove strenuously with me to get me to increase the width of the margins on my manuscripts—but it was all in friendship.

What happened, however, was that as Joel began his program of expansion, George, who had spread himself thin as it was, felt he could keep it up no more. He had put a great deal of himself into the magazine, but the fact is, he had other interests. He runs a small publishing firm, which antedates the magazine, and has writing projects of his own as well, and both have achieved a certain success.

On two previous occasions, George, feeling he had launched the magazine and that it could now continue without him, decided he would turn to his own work, and on each occasion I selfishly persuaded him to stay on.

But now Joel and I recognize that perhaps we ought no longer chivvy him into putting our interests above his. George works out of Philadelphia, after all, and is only at Davis Publications in New York a few hours a week; and Joel feels that expanded operations might well require day-in-day-out presence at headquarters.

So, reluctantly, we have said farewell to George. It is not a true farewell, of course. It is a friendly parting. George, being who he is, will always be interested in the magazine and will always be available for consultation.

In his place, there is now Kathleen Moloney, a woman of quick wit, dynamic personality and (absolutely essential, as far as I am concerned) a sense of humor.

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She has twelve years of experience in editing, and that experience has been characterized by a broad-ranging character. She began as an editor for a hard-cover publishing house in Chicago, then went on to become the editor of the weekly book section of the Chicago Tribune. Following that, she was the executive editor of the Literary Guild Book Club (which meant an at least neighborly relationship with the Science Fiction Book Club). Finally she was executive editor of Bantam Books, a post that included overseeing their science fiction acquisitions. She was thus involved with hard-cover books, with newspapers, with book clubs, and with paperback books, and in every case covered a broad spectrum of writing.

Now that the magazine is safely launched and well-established, so that many problems peculiar to the beginning are behind us,

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Kathleen's general experience and her native intelligence will see to it that she will carry on in the fine tradition of her predecessor.

Shawna is still with us to serve as an element of continuity and experience during the transition. What's more, I intend to make every effort to continue to keep her. Any signs of outside interest I will deal with summarily, and I keep a stout shillelagh with which to beat off anything which might take the magazine's place as her first concern.

Kathleen and Shawna will work well together, I know, and in the expansion of the Davis empire, both will surely rise to positions of increasing importance. Shawna, for instance, is already editor of *Science Fiction Digest.*

So though I have entitled this editorial *Farewell to George,* I might equally well have labeled it *Welcome to Kathleen* or *Stick With Us, Shawna.*

IMPORTANT NOTICE!!! Our address for submission of manuscripts, letters to the editor, and requests for editorial guidelines has changed. The new address is: Editor *IA'sfm,* Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Our subscription address remains the same: PO Box 1933, Marion OH 43306.

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

The Golden Space by Pamela Sargent, Timescape, $13.95.
The Soul Eater by Mike Resnick, Signet, $2.25 (paper).
Science Fiction No-Frills Novel, Jove, $1.50 (paper).
The War Hound and the World's Pain, by Michael Moorcock, Timescape, $12.95.
At the Mountains of Madness, The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, The Doom That Came to Sarnath, The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, The Lurking Fear, The Tomb by H.P. Lovecraft, variously $1.95 to $2.75 Del Rey, (paper).
Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers edited by Curtis C. Smith, St. Martin's Press, $65.

Immortality is a recurring motif in science fiction, but very seldom a major theme, and there's good reason for this. Removing the mortality from a character works all sorts of changes, and not just *within* that character, but in the reader's reaction to what happens to him/her. Without going into all the ramifications, it boils down to the fact that we ordinary mortal observers care a good deal less; this is not just because we find it hard to identify with an immortal being. It is the very transcience of mortal lives that makes what happens to them important; an eternity to try again takes a lot of the vitality out of any event, no matter how major.

This is not to underplay the difficulty of creating the character of an immortal. When one becomes aware of the sometimes vast difference in the personality of an individual at age twenty and age forty, it would be a dull character indeed that wasn't literally something else at age three hundred.

Pamela Sargent tackles these problems in her latest novel, *The Golden Space,* and the results are so good that I wanted them to be better, if you know what I mean.

She gives us a future where the majority of the human race has been rejuvenated and given an endless lifespan by breakthroughs in biological research. This has led to near-catastrophic upheavals which have ended as the book begins. It is in five parts, with fairly lengthy intervals of time intervening, and there is no central figure, though several characters reappear in various sections.

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The first part concerns an attempt to create, through genetic manipulation, a new humanity, physically bisexual and with physiological and psychological refinements that would be better adapted to perpetual life. We follow these children as they grow, face human prejudice, and eventually separate to live for a time among humanity.

In part two we see the reaction of a native of the Moon to a cult absorbed in trying to explore the afterlife by suspending their life functions briefly; and in part three, two of the few children in an immortal world run away from home to explore the moribund countryside, and encounter a girl seemingly about their own age, but in reality a woman kept preadolescent by her biologist, pedophile guardian.

In part four, society has broken down into myriad enclaves, only a few of which are in any way in full communication with the others. The initiator of the project in the first section searches for "his" children of that experiment, and on the way encounters another entirely different attempt to totally reform the human race. The last part is as much of a finale as possible without wiping out the whole of humanity (and offshoots).

Sargent writes well, the many ideas are fresh, and their handling is intelligent to the extreme. That may be part of the reservation I have about *The Golden Space*: the author's response to the challenge of her theme has been more cerebral than dramatic. Don't get me wrong; there is plenty of action (though not necessarily of the knock-'em-down, shoot-'em-up variety) and reaction in the novel. But it all seems to be in one key, in a sense; there are no real outstanding moments—*or* characters, for that matter. It may bring us back to the initial problem; how do you make an immortal, and that which happens to him, vitally interesting?

I must mention that, almost as a throwaway idea, Sargent neatly demolishes the traditional concept of the matter transmitter, by noting that the person assembled on the receiving end, no matter how exact a facsimile, would be just that—a facsimile. The original would have been demolished. This has always bothered me, and I'm glad to see someone else bring it up.

Michael Resnick's first science fiction novel, *The Soul Eater*, is an interesting piece of work. It begins in a sleazy bar in a grubby Tradertown on a backwater planet, and one anticipates a sort of James H. Schmitz romp through a roistering future. The feeling is bolstered by the hero, one Nicobar Lane, who is tough, laconic, cyn-

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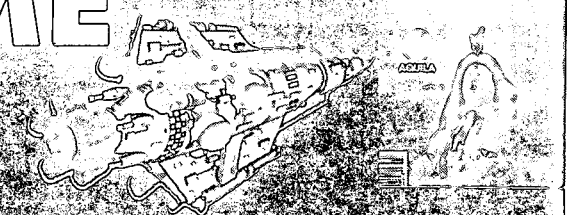

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ical, and makes his living by killing and collecting rare and exotic beasts, usually illegally. So it's something of a surprise when, instead of a romp, you get *Moby Dick*.

One of the legends of the spaceways bandied about in this bar is that of the Dreamwish Beast, which lives in space, feeds on cosmic debris, and has an exceedingly odd effect on the minds of intelligent life forms. Lane disbelieves this legend until he encounters the Beast; its effect on him seems to be his own emotions, amplified and sent back to him. He finds this repugnant but almost erotically addictive, and sets out, he thinks, to kill it.

The search is carried on with the help of an ancient space-mariner; the richest woman in the Deluros system; and one of the few survivors of an alien race whose culture had been based on the then-numerous Beasts.

As you can imagine, the climactic chase is a doozy, up to and including dashing in and out of a black hole. *The Soul Eater* is, in fact, something of a romp, albeit a serious one (if there is such a thing), and my major criticism is that Resnick has extended the story somewhat beyond the capacity of the basic material, though it's a comparatively short novel. (Yes, I know Melville carried it on a good deal longer, but Melville is Melville. Besides, he threw in things like that endless essay on the color white, which brought *me* to a screeching halt.)

One of the (on-purpose) jokes of the publishing season was the release of a series of "no-frills" books. These were paperbacks devoted to various genres with covers echoing the labels of the generic, brandnameless items available in supermarkets. No author is credited and the books are given generic titles—"Science Fiction," "Western," "Romance," etc. All this is supposedly designed to keep the price down.

The question is, of course, do you want the thing no matter what the price is? So in my role of fearless investigator for the science fiction consumer, I decided I would read it.

The cover *does* announce that it is "complete with everything: aliens, giant ants, space cadets, robots, one plucky girl." That I'll confirm; all those ingredients are indeed there.

Not much else, though. A space cadet gets leave from the Academy to help his scientist father figure out what happened to Pluto Base, which seems to have vanished utterly. On Pluto, he falls through a space warp with the aforementioned plucky girl, on the other side of which they find, eventually, the giant ants (unfriendly), the robots

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(friendly), and the aliens (definitely unfriendly; they blow up Earth at the climax), not to mention the lost colony. (In the one original stroke in the book, the only clue to the colony's disappearance lies in a message scratched in the ice of Pluto—"Have gone to Croatan," a duplicate of that message left by the lost colony of Roanoke.)

It's amusingly readable, but nowhere near the funny pastiche of clichés it might have been. As for the value, I would guess that the lower price was mostly achieved by the book being only 58 pages long; judging by supermarket standards, as with those helpful little signs that tell you how much per ounce each brand works out to, this is *not* a bargain, since you're paying about 2½¢ a page as opposed to .8¢ a page for the average paperback at today's prices.

Michael Moorcock is so prolific that he has been labelled in some quarters as one of those writers who just turns 'em out with no regard for quality. For my part, I've never read a Moorcock book that didn't have something of interest going for it, though some are certainly slighter than others. The latest, *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, is on the slight side, and it's a fantasy; in fact, it's labelled "A Fable" and certainly has many of the qualities of that usually boring genre. I don't like fables because they're inconsistent and instructive; Aesop *and* the grasshopper could have been left out all winter so far as I'm concerned.

It says something for Moorcock's ability that he brings this one off with a minimum of tediousness. It's set during the Thirty Years' War, maybe the low point of Western civilization; the hero is one Ulrich von Bek, an intelligent, hardened, and superficially cynical mercenary captain. Fleeing in disgust from a particularly unpleasant massacre, he finds a deserted castle in a peculiarly lifeless forest.

He eventually meets the castle's master, who is Lucifer; he offers von Bek an oddly oblique form of salvation if he will undertake the quest for the Cure to the world's ills, which is, in effect, the Holy Grail. Von Bek does so, his search taking him into Mittelmarch—the Middle Marches—which are lands somewhere between Heaven and Hell and Earth. Here are exotic cities and idyllic lost valleys, sorcerers, witches, and monsters who help and hinder von Bek.

In essence, Moorcock's fable concerns a restructuring of the relationship between the Forces of Good and the Forces of Evil that eventually results in the end of an Age of Superstition and the ensuing Age of Reason. The climax of the quest smacks a little of that infuriating finale to *The Bluebird* (where the Bluebird of Happiness is found to be in the humble cottage all along), but getting

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there has the typical Moorcockiness and pizzazz, and I must admit to enjoying myself along the way.

So if we must have fables, let them be manufactured by Moorcock; the instructive element doesn't get in the way of the scintillating swordplay and the warring wizards.

Have you, in the past year or so, suddenly had that yen (to which I am subject every once in a while) to read some of the tales of witch-haunted Arkham or of what that expedition from dear old Miskatonic U. found in Antarctica; then discovered that your H.P. Lovecraft paperbacks have disappeared into that limbo where sought-after books tend to go (usually having to do with borrowers); and then found that none of Lovecraft's books are available in paperback in this country?

If so, you're not alone by any means, and that is indeed the shocking situation that has prevailed. The only Lovecraft that could be found in paperback has been the odd story in an anthology here and there. (The Arkham House hardcover editions have been continuously available, but they are hardly standard fare for your friendly neighborhood bookseller.)

But, thanks be to Cthulhu, all is well since six major titles have been republished in a handsome uniform paperback edition. And this provides a good opportunity to sort out the Lovecraft canon, which is in a blasphemously unspeakable muddle thanks to several factors. These include his being forced by economic necessity to ghostwrite or collaborate for and with other writers, usually less talented, which resulted in some pretty tedious stuff, and the finishing of a multitude of fragments left by him with decidedly mixed results. Mixed results also describes the number of stories by other authors using his basic material, the Cthulhu mythos.

But here we have six volumes of basic, undiluted Lovecraft, and a lot of it is pure gold. Is it true that his work is dated, wordy, and dreary, as some think it's fashionable to say these days? That's utter nonsense, as any sampling of these volumes will prove. He is certainly writing of and from another age; almost as much time separates us from him as separated him from Poe. The vocabulary is large and esoteric, but wonderfully atmospheric, and don't forget he was writing for the pulps, where things had to happen fast and often; I frankly find the 600-page novels of certain contemporary horror fiction writers, wherein nothing much has happened by page 300, a good deal more wordy and dreary.

Lovecraft, in fact, never did write anything that could be called

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a novel in the modern sense. Even the longer stories barely run over a hundred pages, and another source of confusion lies in the shuffling and redealing of all these short works among various collections with similar or varied names. (For instance, *At the Mountains of Madness* in the definitive Arkham House hardcover edition is a cornucopia of most of the major longer stories; the paperback of the same title has but four works, only one of which, the title story, is lengthy.)

The republished volumes are *The Lurking Fear, The Doom That Came to Sarnath, At the Mountains of Madness, The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,* and *The Tomb*. Here's a sampling of the various high points I found in a thoroughly enjoyable rereading:

The prize of *The Lurking Fear* volume is what may be HPL's most frightening story, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." It's one of the longer ones and is from a time, remember, when a town could remain almost entirely isolated. A young Midwesterner doing geneological research spends an afternoon in the decaying seaport of Innsmouth learning of the strange changes that had come there in the mid-19th century, changes that had slowly transformed the population of the town into very odd fish indeed. He is forced by what seems to be mischance to spend the night in the decrepit railroad hotel, knowing that he knows too much and that the town will get him. The claustrophobic night in the sleazy hotel room and the subsequent pursuit and escape are prime hair-raisers, and there is a kicker that always takes me by surprise. This collection also contains some of the best short stories, including the famous "The Outsider."

The Doom That Came to Sarnath is mostly early stories, from the period when Lovecraft was much under the influence of Dunsany, more occupied with mythical lands than the New England milieu in which he was most successful.

At the Mountains of Madness's notable work is the epic (in 110 pages) title story, a virtuoso mix of SF and horror. (It was first published in the magazine that is now *Analog*.) An Antarctic expedition from Miskatonic U. (located in Lovecraft's mythical Arkham, Mass., on the Miskatonic River) digs up some extraordinary cadavers far inland on the Antarctic continent that could be plants, animals, or intelligent beings. That part of the expedition is subsequently wiped out; the other section discovers an enormous city of cyclopean buildings beyond a range of mountains of super-Everest height, built by an obviously pre- and unhuman race. The question is, what has survived—or thawed out? Lovecraft spells out the his-

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tory of this ancient race in exhaustive detail as his characters discover it; this fascinating view of the past is balanced by the terror and beauty of the vast city in the Antarctic waste and more and more evidence that something is still lurking there.

The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath is the one lengthy work that bears the strong influence of Dunsany; in it, Randolph Carter seeks a gloriously beautiful city he has encountered in his dreams. He knows he can only find it in the world of dream, and only through the auspices of hidden gods of dream in unknown Kadath, whom he must find first.

The resulting journey through the worlds of dream is not quite like anything else in or out of the works of Lovecraft. At times one feels one is reading Robert E. Howard with an expanded vocabulary, which will then turn into moments of whimsical surrealism that are quite mad, such as the point when "Carter crawled through endless burrows with three helpful ghouls bearing the slate gravestone of Col. Nepemiah Derby, obit 1719, from the Charter Street Burying Ground in Salem." The whimsy gets pretty thick in places, as in the three-cornered warfare between the Gugs, the ghasts, and the ghouls, but there is a charming section in a kingdom of cats on the Moon, and anyone accusing Lovecraft of lacking humor has obviously never read *Dream-Quest*. And what and where the sought-after city turns out to be always makes me laugh aloud.

Epitomal is the word for *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which is just long enough to have a volume to itself. In it a scholarly young man of Providence, RI, becomes intrigued with a New England ancestor, all mention of whose existence has been expunged from public records. The first part of the story concerns what Ward discovers about the activities of his forefather; here HPL's great knowledge of New England history provides a convincing background for the horrendous activities of the 18th-century wizard, only one of which is reactivating the dead. All Hell really breaks loose, though, when Charles manages to reanimate Great-grandpa; I was particularly taken with the international traffic in the remains of historically famous people which develops.

The Tomb is another collection of short stories and fragments. Of particular interest are the stories from Lovecraft's unhappy New York period, set in New York City. I was pleased to note that the finale of "He" takes place a block from my current residence; Lovecraft is as meticulous in his New York geography as that of New England. "In the Walls of Eryx" is also of interest as his most overtly science-fictional tale, taking place on Venus, its protagonist a miner

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who discovers a curious artifact, an intricate maze that is totally invisible. The story is very good indeed, and makes one wonder what the results would have been had he done more in the orthodox vein.

If you haven't read Lovecraft, take advantage of this treasure trove while you can. If you have, do some rereading. I practically guarantee a good time.

Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers, edited by Curtis C. Smith, is the most recent addition to the ever-growing ranks of valuable reference works about the field. It covers an extensive list of over 600 writers, giving for each biographical details, a bibliography, an appreciative article on the writer's work in general, and, in certain cases, a statement by the author. In all, I judge it to be a source of much information even for the non-academic general reader. (To avoid any question of conflict of interest, let me note that I contributed in a very minor way [three articles] to this volume and was generously listed as an adviser for some suggestions made.)

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THE ENGINEER OF BEASTS

by Scott Sanders

art: Leo Summers

The author is engaged in a fictional biography of Jean Jacques Audubon; just how *that* leads to *this* we are not prepared to guess.

Orlando Spinks meant no harm. You could have searched that dilapidated organ, his heart, without discovering any murderous hankerings. You could have shone searchlights into the basement of his brain without finding the least cobweb of malice. His intentions were as innocent as butterflies. He merely wished to inject an element of wildness into the beasts he constructed for the Oregon City disney.

Wildness, or at least the simulation of wildness, had been the Spinks family business for several generations. Orlando had learned the trade of beast-engineering from his father, who had learned it from *his* father, who had been a taxidermist back in the long-ago days before everyone withdrew into the Enclosure. Once the domes clamped down over the cities, and the flexiglass travel-tubes bound these floating cities together in a global web, and the extractors began mining the oceans and the recyclers began filtering the air, and the Enclosure was sealed tight in all its manufactured perfection, Grandfather Spinks, who was inside, could no longer stuff the cadavers of animals, which were forever and always outside. He therefore abandoned taxidermy as a doomed craft, like blacksmithing or balladeering, and went to work for one of the disneys, restoring moth-eaten bears and crocodiles. Wearying of the man-sized mice and congenial tigers which Grandfather left behind, Father Spinks introduced frankly imaginary beasts, such as unicorns and griffins and dragons. By the time Orlando became Engineer of Beasts

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for the Oregon City disney, the visitors who trundled past the exhibits no longer knew or much cared which of the animals had once lived on Earth and which were imaginary.

(Those of you who are curious about such things might like to hear that Grandfather drowned while entangled in the mechanical arms of a squid, and Father suffocated while repairing the innards of a hippopotamus.)

Orlando's initial problem was in deciding what constituted wildness. He brooded on this question while puttering in his tinkershop, where Grandfather's collection of stuffed animal heads gazed down at him from the walls like a glum and moldering board of supervisors. Was it simply filth that distinguished wild beasts from his mechanoes? Shaggy fur aswarm with vermin? Or was it stupidity, the inability to reason and talk? Viciousness? Unpredictability? A yen for howling in the middle of the night?

He discussed these conjectures with his apprentice, a mop-haired girl of ten with ingenious fingers and fox eyes.

"I'd vote for filth as a starter," the girl suggested.

"But what shall we use for dirt?" said Orlando.

"Don't you worry, I'll find some."

Before he could object, she was off in search of dirt, a bucket clunking against her knee. Today her hair was bundled up into the shape of a beehive, and convincing bees zipped in the air about her head. She had painted her face and arms with splotches of red to make it appear she had been stung repeatedly. The pedbelt riders—who would never have seen actual bees, but who could recognize eccentricity from half a kilometer away—shouldered aside to give her ample room.

If anywhere in this immaculate floating city a bucketful of dirt had escaped the vaporizers and recyclers, Orlando felt confident she would retrieve it. Her name was Mooch. He had first encountered her one Sunday in the lion's den with her arms and head thrust inside the principal lion's mouth. The jaws were programmed to open and shut in synchrony with recorded roars, but the presence of her torso somehow jammed the mechanism, and the lion's rubber teeth clamped tight about the girl's midriff. Orlando inquired what she meant by thus invading his delicate beast. Her answer was too muffled for translation.

When he pried her loose she lambasted him for having stuffed the lion's gut with wheels instead of lungs and bowels. "You've even got him saying silly pompous speeches between roars," she complained. "Don't you know lions couldn't talk? And if they could have, they'd

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have talked about sunlight or the taste of antelope bones, not about safaris. What you need is somebody around who knows the beasts. Somebody who's read all the animal books, watched the wildlife feeliefilms, tromped through holograph jungles and forests. Somebody like me. I don't know how old you are, mister; but you don't look like you'll last too much longer. Make me your apprentice, and we'll turn this disney into a place that will stand people's hair on end."

At this point in their initial interview the girl extended one small hand, smudged with grease from the lion's jaw. Instinctively grasping it, Orlando felt the quickness in the fingers, saw the eyes measuring him as if he were one of the mechanized exhibits.

"Then it's a deal," she said. "Call me Mooch."

In fact Orlando had been searching for an apprentice, whom he could teach the subtleties of beast-engineering. Since he had scored too low to qualify for breeding, he would never have a son or daughter; so he was content when Mooch crawled out of the lion's mouth and ensnared him in her dizzy speech. Authorities at the city nursery were downright eager to let Orlando claim her, for Mooch was the slipperiest foundling they had ever tried to corral. She would steal past the nursery's electronic walls and ride for hours on the pedbelts or creep through the engine rooms in the deepest levels of the city or saunter through the disney, as she had been doing the day the lion bit her.

Thus Orlando was not surprised when she returned from her dirt search leading a go-wagon that was heaped with dust, grit, straw, balls of hair, and sundry obscure items of filth. While Mooch plastered the animals with this grime, Orlando drew up signs explaining to visitors that such squalor was typical of beasts in the wild. He also took the occasion to rearrange the exhibits. Father Spinks had displayed the beasts alphabetically, so that dragons stood cheek-by-jowl next to dinosaurs, griffins next to giraffes. However beasts used to array themselves in the wilderness, Orlando felt certain they would not have done so alphabetically.

"Why don't we put the forest creatures with other forest creatures," Mooch proposed, "and all the river beasts together, the snow leopard with the abominable snowman, and like that?"

"You tell me what goes with what, and I'll shuffle the beasts," agreed Orlando, who was a genius at engineering but rather in the dark in matters of biology.

Since there was no distinction between day and night, summer and winter, workday and playday within the Enclosure, the disney

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never closed, which meant that Orlando had to shuffle the exhibits while visitors watched. The temporary separation of beasts from their labels led to confusion. He might be wheeling a polar bear onto a synthetic iceberg, say, while Mooch danced alongside smearing the fur with goo, and a tourist would holler, "What did that skunk used to eat?"

Indeed, as Mooch's pilfered filth began to ripen, many of the beasts were identified by visitors as skunks. More than one shuttle-load of school children yelled out rude variations on the question, "Why do these mechanoes stink?"

"That was their general custom in the wild," Orlando would answer politely.

Fortunately the Overseers of the disney knew even less of biology than he did, so they permitted him to rearrange the exhibits and besmirch the beasts to his heart's content—provided, of course, the gate receipts held firm.

Positioning the imaginary beasts was somewhat of a problem, because in most instances their habitat was ill-defined. Dragons and trolls could be placed in caves with bats and bears. But where would you put a griffin? Did it belong with the eagles or with the lions? Should centaurs be sent out to graze with zebras, or should they be locked away in the apehouse out of respect for their human torsos? Sasquatches had been reported everywhere from the rain forest of Colombia to the airless heights of the Himalayas, yet none had ever been captured, so where did you exhibit this hairy shambling monster? Orlando was beginning to understand why his father had opted for the alphabetical display.

In the end he and the girl herded all the unplaceable beasts—the feathered serpents and snake-haired gorgons, the whiskered growlers and long-fanged snuffers—into a huge pit, where the creatures milled around like a nightmare stew.

This monster pit soon became a favorite haunt for visitors, who cruised through the disney in undiminished numbers, wigs and moodgowns gleaming in the fluorescent light. Many of them now wore helmets, to shield them from the stench.

No sooner was the soiling and shuffling completed than Mooch declared, "How about we do over the voice tapes? Erase all that human blab and make them sound like animals?"

"There's quite a collection of howls and hisses in the tape library," Orlando said by way of agreement.

"Sure, and whatever's lacking there I'll do myself," said the girl, whereupon she launched into a hair-raising chorus of snarls and

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grunts and whistles. "And I can do gnawing on bones, death-rattles, the way they pant when they're chased down and cornered, claws on stone, fights. Just listen."

Orlando was convinced by her vocal demonstration. His skin did not smooth out for a long while after.

Modifying the tapes took just over a month. The grizzly bear no longer told stories about forest fires, but instead merely growled occasionally. The monkeys now chattered gibberish instead of reciting jingles. The elephants ceased ruminating on philosophy and began simply ruminating, quietly munching synthetic hay. The giraffe stopped bantering jokes about the inconvenience of a long neck, and kept silent. Following what the old biology textbooks advised, Orlando programmed most of the beasts to remain silent now most of the time. The forests must have been eerie places, he decided, quiet as tombs except for wind and water and birds. And even birds kept mum half the day.

Visitors who complained about this silence or about the sporadic bestial sounds were provided with cassettes which played all the old malarkey inside their helmets.

Disgruntled guests were less readily appeased after the next alteration. Following the logic of his search for wildness, and following Mooch's suggestions, Orlando reprogrammed the beasts to act like beasts, instead of like humans dressed up in fur suits. Deciding which behaviors to eliminate was easy. Rhinoceroses should not balance balls on their nasal horns, rabbits should not wear vests or pocket watches, gorillas should not play drums, flamingos should not play croquet. Deciding what all these creatures should *do* was an altogether more difficult matter.

"Mostly they just slept and ate and hunted," said Mooch.

"Who wants to watch beasts snoozing?" Orlando objected reasonably.

"How about if we make half of the ones in each exhibit hunt while the other half sleep?"

"What will they hunt?"

"Each other."

This transformation required nearly three months of labor. Frogs now gobbled flies, mice pounced on frogs, rabbits gobbled mice, owls murdered the rabbits, and high-leaping wolves snared the owls. At the end of each cycle of destruction the victims were restored to life, put to sleep, and the former sleepers were aroused for hunting.

After an interval of uncertainty, the visitors applauded this new regime. Wherever they turned in the disney, some beast was always

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slaughtering some other one. The herbivores, stupidly chewing their cuds, were generally ignored, unless a cow, say, were attacked by a mountain lion or a sheep by a pack of raccoons.

Undeterred by the spectacle of snapping jaws or by the mangy hides liberally sprinkled with imitation vermin, the visitors still crowded up to pat the beasts. "Nice pussy," they would murmur to the Bengal tigers. "Sweet little pooch," they would lullaby to the jackals. This coochy-coo familiarity struck Orlando as unseemly.

"Should I put up polyfilm barriers to keep people out?" he wondered aloud.

Mooch withdrew a well-chewed pigtail from her mouth. "No, don't put up any barriers," she said. "Wild beasts never lived behind glass. Why don't we just paint a line between the crowds and the exhibits, and program the beasts to bite anyone who crosses it?"

"Bite the visitors?" he replied incredulously.

"Only a gentle munch on the arm, you know, and maybe a lash or two with the tail." When he hesitated, the girl added, "You want them to respect the beasts, don't you?"

He converted the jungle exhibit first. Monkeys would now hurl plastic fruits at intruders, cheetahs would leap on them, pythons would coil about their legs, spiders would scrabble through openings in moodgowns. The warning signs declared: DO NOT CROSS SAFETY LINE. LIKE THE WILD BEASTS AFTER WHICH THEY ARE COPIED, THESE MECHANOES ARE DANGEROUS. In the barnyard exhibit, Orlando programmed the mules to kick at intruders, the pigs to gnaw upon ankles, the chickens to peck, the geese to slap with webbed feet.

Inevitably, some visitors ignored the warning signs. When this happened, Orlando would have to shut off the power beam and go pry the terrified trespasser from the grip of an orangutan, as the case might be, or from beneath the squatting bulk of a diplodocus. In a number of instances he was forced to modify the programming, when an overzealous beast would actually puncture a gown with its claws or wrench a visitor's shoulder.

The Overseers of the disney grumbled about this latest innovation. Humanity had withdrawn into the Enclosure, after all, to be shielded from the grab-and-gobble of nature. And here was their beast-engineer unleashing mechanical marauders indoors. They were on the point of retiring him when the gate receipts began to swell. The citizens, it appeared, enjoyed being terrified out of their wits. News of the beast-attacks had spread through Oregon City, and visitors crowded into the disney, edging beyond the warning lines, provoking assaults from squirrels and moose and pterodactyls. The Overseers

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folded their hands and waited.

"Somebody's going to get hurt," Orlando prophesied bleakly.

"Probably," Mooch agreed. "Unless people quit crowding the beasts."

"You say that like it doesn't worry you."

"You can't have wildness without breaking a few eggs."

"Eggs?" he said.

"You know—people."

The way Mooch twisted her mouth and fixed him with her fox eyes, Orlando could not tell whether she was eager or reluctant to see the first mangled body.

The first one turned out to be Orlando's. He forgot to extinguish the power beam one day before entering the crocodile pool with his oilcan. By the time Mooch cut their power, the overgrown lizards had fractured one of his legs and three of his ribs.

"You see what I mean about broken eggs," Mooch pointed out while his bones were knitting.

During his recuperation she spent a good deal of time, he noticed, tinkering with the beasts. As soon as he was sufficiently mended to roll about the disney in an electric zip-cart, Orlando painted a second row of warning lines at a safer distance from the exhibits. Crossing this new Rubicon would trigger a hoot and holler of warnings. He was afraid to think what crossing the old line would trigger, now that Mooch had fiddled with the controls.

In addition to the new warning signals, the sight of the beast-engineer cruising around in bandages had a chastening effect upon the visitors. Several weeks passed without further mayhem. Then a gang of teenagers dared one another into invading Monkey Mountain. Monkeys rained down on them like a storm of screeching furballs. The rage of these little manikins astonished even Orlando, who after all had built them. For some reason he could not shut down the power beam, so he had to rescue the pummeled teenagers with hook-nets. The four who had neglected to wear helmets were hospitalized with concussions. The Health Board inquired. The Overseers wheeled Orlando before them and read him the fine print from their insurance contracts.

Defang the beasts, he was sternly commanded. *Restore them to their jovial condition, with glistening fur and catchy songs and tricks for the kiddies. And prepare the girl to replace you.*

"But the child's only just turned eleven," Orlando objected.

Once the beasts are tamed, the Overseers thundered, *any child with a bit of mechanical dexterity could keep them humming. You*

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do as we command, or something worse than crocodiles will land on you.

On the gate of the disney he mounted a sign declaring the place closed for alterations. Against doctor's orders, he abandoned the zip-cart and heaved himself onto crutches. Mooch glumped along muttering at his heels. When Orlando prepared for work on the exhibits themselves, however, he soon discovered that cutting the power beams did not turn off the beasts.

"Have you had this problem?" he asked Mooch.

"I haven't tried snuffing them since you got mangled."

"But what do you do when you go in for repairs?"

"They seem to be fixing themselves pretty good without me."

"But you do go inside the cages *sometimes.* I've seen you."

Mooch shrugged. "I don't know. Seems like they just leave me alone."

He gazed across the twin warning lines at a pugnacious-looking kangaroo, which was picking plastic lice from its offspring. Nearby a hyena methodically swallowed, and then regurgitated, a lizard. He said, "You think they'll let me reprogram them without tearing me limb from limb?"

"I wouldn't lay money on it."

He shut the central power down completely, erected screens around the exhibits to block any pirate beams that might be streaming in from unknown sources. And still the beasts yawned, murdered one another, stared beadily at him.

"You didn't by any chance rig them up with batteries, did you?" he asked.

Mooch peeked out through the cage of her fingers. "Come to think of it, I did. Stuffed them with some five-year juice-boxes while the medics were gluing you back together."

"Five-year go-packs!" he moaned. "What for, you little monster?"

"Have you ever heard of a wild beast you could turn off?" She thrust out her lower lip, crinkled her face, on the slippery edge of tears. "I was just doing it for you," she wailed. "Didn't you want them wild?"

An anteater regarded him from a neighboring hillock, like a scholar perusing a footnote. Orlando tried to recall the blighted moment in which the wilderness yearning had first barged through his heart. Was it just before or just after he liberated Mooch from the lion's jaw? In any case, that vagrant yearning had planted a seed of disaster. Sighing, he inquired, "Can you go in and unplug them?"

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Her whole body shook a *no* answer. "They'd make kid confetti of me if I tried to snuff them. The only reason they let me be when I go near them is because I let *them* be."

"Five years." Orlando glanced at a sullen water buffalo, which was idly demolishing its flexiglass manger. "Mooch, sweetheart, we can't close the disney for five years while we wait for their batteries to run down."

"So why don't we turn this place into a wildlife sanctuary, and build a nicey-nice disney for the gawkers somewhere else?"

"Child, listen, this patch of Oregon City is worth—I don't know, billions and billions. The Overseers would have every last beast vaporized before they'd yield one cubic centimeter of space."

"Really? They'd just zap them?"

"Burn them to atoms," he said.

The girl appeared to be chewing on this as if it were the first bite of the worst food she had ever tasted. To sweeten the taste, he added, "Don't worry, I'll figure out a way to de-energize the batteries before the Overseers come in blasting."

While he experimented with neutralizing rays, the Overseers grew impatient. Half a dozen of them soon arrived, gliding up in riot suits with melt-guns swinging from their fists. He could stay in his tinkershop, they announced, because they wanted to gauge for themselves how far he had progressed in taming the beasts. They divided into three groups of two and dispersed among the exhibits, helmets gleaming and melters at the ready. A few minutes later, one pair staggered up to the door of his tinkershop with arms wrapped about each other, like the winning couple in a dance marathon. Two Overseers were later found in numerous bloody pieces outside the rain forest display, another was found crushed like a sackful of bones in a men's room, and the fourth bobbed in the tropical fish pool.

The two survivors, who had fought off an attack of birds, slumped inside his shop and kicked the door shut behind them. Mooch backed against a wall and studied them warily. Blood seeped through the rents of their riot suits. *Call immediately,* one of them gasped, *and order the patrollers to vaporize every last infernal beast.* As Orlando placed the call, Mooch eased along the wall to the door, opened it stealthily, and slipped out. Catching sight of her vanishing pigtail, he paused with mouth sagging open. *Say we want them destroyed right away!* one of the Overseers shouted. Orlando completed the message, heard the sirens cranking up, knew salvation would arrive within minutes. He leaned on his crutches and ached in his heart after the child.

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Presently there came a thudding and scraping against the walls of the tinkershop, as if a giant were fumbling for a handhold. Looking out, Orlando saw the tide of beasts surging past, snakes and leopards and ostriches, breast-thumping gorillas, monkeys shuffling arm-in-arm, prides of lions and families of dragons, one-eyed beasts and beasts with two heads, and away up at the leading edge, just bursting out through the front gates of the disney, was a phalanx of elephants, and atop the tallest of these, like a diadem, sat Mooch.

Orlando cried. He wailed and beat the walls of his tinkershop. He shouted at the bullying Overseers.

Just as the last of the beasts trailed past the window, shuttles slithered into the airspace overhead, vaporizers zinging. Orlando hobbled outside and blinked up at the hovering white machines. The patrollers had begun with the rearmost beasts and were blasting their way forward through the furry ranks.

"Not the elephants!" he yelled through cupped hands.

The shuttles glided relentlessly onward, erasing the beasts with neat sweeps of the vaporizers.

Orlando scuttled along the path of devastation, swinging his weight on the crutches. Any citizens who might have been riding the pedbelts or strolling in the plazas when the beasts broke out had quickly retreated into buildings. Awestruck faces gazed at him through windows as he stumbled past. The beasts had overturned wheelies, toppled lightsigns, flattened bubble-booths in their march toward the outer wall of the city.

The air tingled from the vaporizers. Here and there a paw or tail has escaped the annihilating rays, and lay among the rubble like discards from a costume shop.

"Spare the elephants!" he cried.

The patrollers must have noticed the girl at last, because when they had erased all but the huge grey lumbering beasts, they held their fire. The shuttles hesitated a few meters above her head like blind white fish that had blundered into the air. One by one they picked off the outriding elephants until only hers remained. Still she kept on, and Orlando panted after her.

"Mooch! Come down, child!"

He caught up with her just as the bull elephant leaned his vast, wrinkled forehead against the wall of the city. The beast reared on its hind legs and slammed its weight against the barrier, reared and slammed, while Mooch held on to its ears. Although he knew it was impossible, Orlando thought the foundations of the floating city were shivering from the blows.

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"Mooch!" He clawed at the animal's greasy flanks, trying to climb up.

But the girl stared fiercely ahead, through the transparent wall, across a dozen kilometers of ocean, at the blunt green hills of Oregon.

After a moment's pause the vaporizer beams sliced into the heaving buttocks and burned forward along the great arched spine, undoing the beast, until only the huge battering head was left wobbling on the front legs. Then with a one-two punch the legs were puffed away, the head lolled drunkenly, ears flapping, and Mooch tumbled down.

Orlando shuffled over to where she lay. She was not crying, as he had imagined she would be. Instead she huddled in his arms without making a sound. Her jaw was clamped shut, as if she had caught some rare bird of grief in her mouth and meant to keep it safe.

Waking later that night to the sound of tools clinking, he rose from bed and hobbled through the darkened tinkershop. He found the girl leaning over a workbench, where a gangling ropy monster was taking shape. It was made of flexible conduit, and looked like an enormous snake. Where the fangs ordinarily would be, she had mounted one of the diamond-wheels he used for cutting flexiglass.

"Child, you know we're forbidden to make any more beasts."

"It's not a beast," she muttered.

"It looks like a python. Big enough to swallow you."

"It's just a machine."

He fingered one of the needles on the cutting wheel. "Why the funny snout? Are you planning to cut a hole in something?"

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll drill above the water line. I don't want Oregon City springing a leak."

The misery swelling in him felt so enormous he imagined his skin stretching. "You can't go outside, child. There's ocean."

"I'm making it water-tight," she explained, slapping the conduit. "And I'll put a motor in."

"But even if you make it to shore, you'll never survive in the woods."

"People have. For several million years."

"You can't go!"

She turned on him a look so dark it was as if two holes had suddenly opened in the roof of the city and the fathomless night were staring in. "Are you going to stop me?" she demanded.

Orlando retreated from her glare, lay down again on his bed, but could not sleep. The clink of tools played through the empty hours.

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The sound made him think of teeth clacking against bone, and he remembered his father telling him that wolves caught in traps would gnaw through their own legs to get free. After lying awake the rest of the night, thinking about Mooch and wolves and the numberless ghosts of wild things, he decided to let her go.

TANKA FOR THE VIKING LANDERS

Ambiguity
and more questions than answers
unearthed countless more:
so much learned on science and
inquiry from so few facts.

—Robert Frazier

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BEWARE OF THE SENTIENT CHILI

Beware of the sentient chili
Which burbles away on your stoves.
The peppers are silently plotting
With legumes, tomatoes, and cloves.
At night when you're comf'rtably sleeping
And lie unaware in your beds
The vegetables plan insurrection
The lettuce are seeking new heads.

It may start with slight indigestion
From underdone turnip cake crumbs
Frustration in several world leaders
Whose rice seems to stick to their gums.
In kitchens across every nation
The tiniest things will go wrong.
The plot of the sentient chili
Strikes Moscow and Rome and Hong Kong.

The casserole, spinach, and cheesecake
Lend quiet support to the scheme.
The nerves of a planet are stretched thin
While tempers start slowly to steam.
Still none see the grand machinations
Now tilting world balance awry.
The stage set for final disaster
The chili sits back with a sigh.

Then one day the conflict is started
By gen'rals whose lunches were odd.
The mushrooms rejoice as their brothers
Stalk city to city like God.
When dust and all clamor are settled
There's not a soul left from the fray.
The sentient chili just chuckles
And happily simmers away.

—Chris Weber

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HUMPTY FALLS AGAIN

by Martin Gardner

I had been reading in bed, chuckling over the manuscript of Professor Raymond Smullyan's remarkable new book, *Alice in Puzzle-land* (to be published soon by Morrow). Just as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard the sound of someone moving about in the kitchen.

I padded to the kitchen on bare feet. Who should be standing there, by the oven, but Humpty Dumpty himself.

"Good morning," said the large egg. (It was 3 A.M.)

"May I ask what you are doing here?" I said.

"You may," replied Humpty. "Remember the blue caterpillar's mushroom?"

"Of course."

"I've just cooked some of it for you."

Humpty took a dish out of the oven, picked up a piece of mushroom and handed it to me.

"Which side did it come from?" I asked. "Will it make me grow or shrink?"

"It came from the right side," said Humpty.

By now I realized I was in a Carrollian dream. It was too interesting to be disturbed by waking myself up, so I popped the mushroom into my mouth and instantly became three inches high.

Humpty extracted a pocket mirror from his vest and placed it on the kitchen counter, mirror side up. Then he picked me up by the collar of my pajamas and set me down on the mirror. Well, not exactly. I dropped through the mirror as if I had dropped through a trap door.

Thump! I landed in a sprawl on some soft grass. When I picked myself up, there was Humpty, grinning down at me from a tall, narrow stone wall on which he was precariously perched.

"That wasn't a bad fall, was it?" he said.

"I could have broken a leg."

"But you didn't. You people with bones don't know how lucky you are. Now let me show you why I brought you here."

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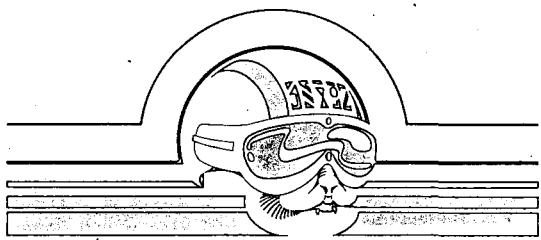
He leaned forward, almost toppling off the wall, to point to some strange Arabic-looking letters painted in black on stone blocks just below his feet. The letters are reproduced in Figure 1.

"Tell me what those marks mean," said Humpty, "and I'll introduce you to the Tweedle brothers. They have a message they want you to give Smullyan."

Can you answer Humpty's question? If not, you'll find the solution on page 53.



ON SPACE TRAVEL

If space is oh, so grand and vast,
Should man content himself with Earth?
This question I hear often asked;
The answer's no, for what it's worth.
If He intended we remain
To fold our hand at Heaven's bluff,
I rather think that He'd maintain
A sky made out of sterner stuff.

—Max Fell

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THE CURIOUS CONSULTATION

by J.O. Jeppson

art: Tim Kirk

Dr. Jeppson warns us that she is a nervous wreck because her home has been INVADED BY A COMPUTER. Some magazine *[not IA'sf]* persuaded a company in the small-computer business to lend her and her husband a machine with a word-processing program. The problem, she tells us, is that the machine terrifies her and she can't seem to

she was complaining about the printer on her machine, that same printer went berserk and shoved the paper out of itself, losing the very sentences in which she excoriated its name. Dr. Jeppson's husband, however, is at this VERY moment in the living room huddled with that seductive machine, typing final copy of innumerable manuscripts faster than the speed of light. Woe is her, she adds.

"I don't see why we have to be Pshrinks *Anonymous*," said one of the members of the Psychoanalytic Alliance luncheon club. "This pretending that we don't know who we are . . ."

"Ah," said one of the Interpersonals.

The Oldest Member (who relished his title, stolen from Wodehouse) looked at her suspiciously. "There's no point in discussing the use of our anonymity. It's a great relief not having to remember names."

"What's in a name?" said the Youngest Member.

"You'd better not say that," said the Interpersonal.

"I would ask why not," said the Oldest Member, "but I realize that posing such a question might make this entree even more inedible than it looks. Whose turn was it to plan the menu?"

"Mine," said a Behaviorist who was also, unaccountably, a graduate Pshrink. "This is a new dish—Conditioned Capon."

The Oldest Member squinted at his plate. "Full of frustrated sexuality, no doubt." He picked up a particularly phallic drumstick and turned to the Interpersonal. "I suppose you have an atrocious case history to report?"

"Indubitably," she said.

"What's in a name?" may well be the question of the year, or of the century, for all I know [said the Interpersonal]. Before I explain that, I must go back to the days when I was still in analytic school, in my late twenties. Some of my classmates were much older, having spent years as psychotherapists before deciding to get analytic training. One of these was a man about forty who already had a thriving psychiatric practice and would occasionally send me referrals, usually female patients whose transferences to him had gone out of

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medium fat, and medium homely. Perhaps it was his medium motherliness that got to them.

I shall refer to this classmate as Dr. S., or Stuffy as we always called him.

When I first knew Stuffy, he was having trouble getting through analytic training because he seemed to have no analytic intuition and tended to stay stuck in the rôle of a benevolently supportive doctor, unable to master the nuances of Pshrinkhood. The rest of us in the class thought of him as a prosaically unflappable nonentity with no imagination.

I was therefore surprised one day when he called me to ask if I would do a special one-shot consultation on a male patient of his. Old Stuffy sounded almost agitated.

"I can't understand what's happened," he said. "The treatment seemed to be going well, even a little analytically, although it wasn't one of the cases I'm presenting to my supervisors. The patient seems to be running into—well, er—severe neurotic difficulties. I thought maybe you would figure out what's going on."

"Why don't you send the patient to one of the older analysts at the Institute? One of your supervisors?"

"And have everyone know I'm a failure at doing analysis?"

Stuffy always seemed to devote himself to being the kind of conventional success that does not attract attention. He seemed addicted to suits and ties and ideas that were drab and ordinary. His hair was short, his voice bland; he ate steak and potatoes; his office was decorated in motel modern. His wife had divorced him two years previously, presumably on grounds of terminal boredom.

"Well," I said, "why me?"

"I understand that you read that sci-fi stuff."

"SF! And what's that got to do with your patient?"

I could hear Stuffy's gulp galloping across Ma Bell's wires. "I've taken it up with my analyst, but she's no help. She doesn't read science fiction and you do. You must see this patient."

"Aren't you going to tell me anything about what you hope to learn from the consultation?"

"No. I might prejudice you. I'll merely tell you that the patient is a twenty-two-year-old white male physicist with a Ph.D. and a good research job. I've been treating him for a year. He had a certain amount of performance anxiety at work and in his social life, but it's been clearing up nicely, and I was thinking we could terminate therapy soon."

"He seems to be getting worse for an unknown reason?"

"Oh, the reason isn't unknown. I just don't understand it. I want

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to know your opinion."

"Filtered through my knowledge of science fiction," I said sarcastically.

"Exactly. Please help!"

When we hung up, my previous mental image of Dr. S. was shaken. Was this the Stuffy I knew, who had apparently been born middle-aged and complacent? When his wife left, he hadn't given any evidence of being rattled; and none of his supervisors in analytic school had ever been able to ripple his surface. This patient had, for that word help ended in a plaintive squeak.

Suddenly I reheard Stuffy's description of the patient who was to call me for an appointment. Had I heard correctly? A working physicist, complete with Ph.D., who was only twenty-two years old?

The patient came for a consultation at the end of that week. I will call him Nemo, although of course that was not his name. He was tall, thin, and as knobby as if he'd been constructed out of elbows; and his bristly red hair stuck out at the temples almost at right angles. He appeared to be so adolescent that I prepared myself for a consultation centered on his delayed emotional maturation.

"I'm supposed to be a genius . . . ," he announced, stumbling over the rug and falling sideways into the patient's chair. Rubbing the bony knee he had presumably just bruised, he added, ". . . in science. Mentally. I haven't been expert at the rest of life but I'm learning, or I will if you shrinks can keep me out of Bellevue Psycho." He reached up with both hands and tugged at the juts of red hair as if to strengthen what lay between them.

"Who thinks you ought to go there?" I asked, wondering if he were as anxious as he looked.

"I do. Maybe Stuffy does."

"How do you know his nickname?"

"One of my older cousins went to medical school with him. Said Stuffy was reasonably intelligent, sympathetic, and knowledgeable about how to get along in the ordinary world, so I went to him for psychotherapy. I like Stuffy."

He frowned at me. "I know I've upset him, but I can't say I approve of this consultation business. You're too young. I don't like talking to a shrink who is my own age."

Although I was then still on his side of thirty, I tried to nod analytically while arranging my face into what I hoped was an aspect both mature and sophisticated. I said, "You don't have to talk to me, but as long as you're here you might try it, especially since I'm actually a lot older than you are."

"Oh. Really?" He bent forward to study me. "Yeah. You are."

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I found one of my hands hovering upward to grasp my own hair at the temples. As I fought to control this phenomenon, I said, "Then suppose we talk about why you and Stuffy think you need Bellevue."

"Because of a dream. I had it a few weeks ago, after a frustrating day of playing chess with the lab computer, which I can't make smart enough to beat me. Nothing's been the same since. It was pleasant in the dream at first—I was floating in a warm and sort of homey dark. Undoubtedly my first authentic back-to-the-womb experience. Stuffy loved it."

I recalled that in analytic school Stuffy's supervisors were complaining about his penchant for clinging to the safe rigidities of antiquated Freudian concepts which seem to explain everything. . . .

["Antiquated!" roared the Oldest Member, whose thinking had congealed half a century previously. "Nonsense!"]

. . . I decided [continued the Interpersonal, patting the Oldest Member's elegantly jacketed arm] that I had better not comment.

"All at once," said Nemo, "I heard a word."

There was a long pause, during which he squirmed in the chair.

"What was it?"

He took a deep breath, expelled it forcefully, cleared his throat, and said something—a word, if it was that, so long and complicated that it sounded like several utterly weird syllables welded together to create a more bizarre piece of language than I had ever heard.

"Damn," said Nemo. "I did it badly again. That's approximately, but not quite, what I heard in the dream, in the warm dark; and I can't get it out of my head. I think about it all the time. It's driving me crazy not to be able to reproduce it completely accurately, for myself or for anyone else to hear. That and the implications. Did you by chance get any—um—sensation when I said it?"

"No."

"Stuffy seemed to, but I reproduced it better for him."

"Do you, or did you get a sensation?" I asked.

He was silent, and didn't squirm at all. I was disquieted by his physical stillness and blank face, as if he were listening intently. I was also annoyed at Stuffy for referring what seemed to be an acutely hallucinating patient, without warning me first.

After what seemed like hours of silence, I said, "Are you still with me?"

Immediately, his facial muscles formed themselves into another expression of acute anxiety. "You would have to talk, wouldn't you! I thought I'd memorize it that time."

"You were *hearing* it?"

"*Remembering* it. I'm not hallucinating! It's probably not impor-

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tant at all. I don't know why it bugs me this way except that I think . . ."

I waited, and then said, "Think what?"

Nemo laughed. I had the distinct impression that he was changing the subject. He shrugged and said, "Forget it. The noise I thought I heard in my dream is probably just a swear word my unconscious invented to use against that stupid computer. Or maybe it's what Stuffy tried to convince me it was, a memory of an unpleasant noise my mother made when I was *in utero*. Wouldn't it be funny if the fate of the world was decided because of an unusual maternal sneeze, burp, or fart?"

"Fate of the world?"

Nemo paled. "I didn't realize I said that. Damn."

"Explain."

"You remind me of my computer when you do that. I've programmed it to show a big question mark on the tape when it doesn't understand the instruction, which is most of the time. It's incredibly stupid. Someday computers will be smarter, and won't fill a room the way the one at our lab does."

"You might still try explaining . . ."

"I don't want to. Forget the whole thing. It was just a silly noise in a dream. Something I ate, no doubt."

I had now run into a dead end in my investigation of what we pshrinks call the chief complaint. It was time to investigate the history of the patient. Fortunately I had already learned to schedule extra time for consultations so that the patient would not have to leap out of the room at fifty minutes.

"You mentioned your mother. Perhaps you could tell me something about her," I began, imitating one of my more obsessional supervisors' history-taking routine.

I heard about his mother, who didn't sound much better or worse than any who have had to cope with children equipped with unexpectedly high I.Q.s. Ditto his father, his ordinary siblings, the family dog and parakeet, the near and far relatives, the important teachers and camp counselors, chums and girlfriends, and so on. Since Nemo was an experienced patient, he rattled through all this in a remarkably short time.

It seemed that aside from his certifiable case of genius, Nemo had no obvious history that could definitely account for the development of his current problem. He didn't take drugs or alcohol, did not suffer social or sensory deprivation, had no unusual sexual difficulties, enjoyed his friends and family and particularly his career. I did not believe that he was being made ill by his interest in science fiction,

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or his career in the new and burgeoning field of developing artificial intelligence. . . .

["That only goes to prove that your own neurotic bias got in the way of thinking clearly and analytically about this patient," said the Oldest Member severely.]

. . . and [continued the Interpersonal after a slight groan] it seemed to me that up to the moment Nemo had that mysterious dream, he'd been an example of the research evidence that people with high intelligence—even those addicted to science fiction—are more often happy and successful than not.

"We're back to the noise in your head," I finally said, deliberately choosing "noise" instead of "word" so that he would want to answer. He did.

"I tell you it's not a noise—it's a word! In fact, it feels as if it's a *name*, a name stuck in my memory that I can't reproduce and somehow I must."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"What did you think was making the noise. I mean, saying the name."

"What's the use of telling you since you'll only say that it came out of my brain, so that the only person saying the name is me."

"We can always return to that hypothesis. What do you imagine—no, let me ask it another way. In the dream itself, what seemed to be saying the name?"

"That's just it. *I* was. Or I was tuning into something I was hearing and I was naming it—oh hell, I don't know." He put his head in his hands. "I'm falling apart. Ever since this happened I've been studying and studying. Did you know that names have mystical meaning and frightening power in most mythologies? Did you know how the ancient Hebrews never said or wrote the name of their god but instead used a word meaning 'That Which Is'? That in the Biblical tales Adam was supposed to have power over each thing he named? That in many cultures children are named after animals in order to incorporate the desired traits of the animal, that names are part of many taboo practices, many rituals of adolescence in which a new name is given, many rites of kingship in which a new title is bestowed by grace of the deity—"

"But—"

"And get this. The word nāma in Buddhism really means all mental processes collectively speaking—"

"You do not appear to be telling me what you thought, in the dream, was making the noise."

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He paid no attention. "I can remember the sound, but I can't see it. I'm not a very visual person anyway—much more aural—yet I ought to be able to visualize how the word might be spelled in English letters, but I can't. I've studied up on phonetics and dipped into linguistics, but so far it hasn't helped, and religion is even more useless, although of course I've wondered about that. As I told you, I'm a scientific agnostic from a non-religious family and I just won't believe that this is my unconscious telling me I ought to get religion!"

"What made the noise?" I repeated. When patients ostentatiously avoid answering a question, it usually means something; or so my supervisors were telling me.

"And did you know that **nama**, without the line over the first **a**, is also the word for *name* in Old English? Fascinating. There's a famous one-syllable word used as a mantrum, or part of a mantrum, in many oriental religions. **Om** is supposed to be the syllable of the supreme reality, or—if you want to get deistic and into the thinking of the common herd—Oriental this time, the name for the trinity of the gods."

"Did you tell Stuffy what, in your opinion, made the noise?"

Nemo scowled. "That's a silly question. Stuffy's upset enough after hearing the almost-good-enough reproduction of the noise I made in his office once."

"All right. Protect him. I'm only the consultant. What made—no." I stopped, studied the agitation in his face, and decided to take a calculated risk. "*Who* made the noise?"

"Very smart," said Nemo bitterly. "Now I'm supposed to go out on a limb with speculation, after which you will demolish me by saying that I was tuning into a memory of a name from the past, some garbled version a child would invent, and I can't recapture it because I had lots of ambivalent feelings about whatever or whomever from the past."

"Well, I—"

"You needn't be such an ass! You should have figured out already that what scares me out of my pants is the possibility that the noise, word, name or whatever was never heard on Earth before!"

Nemo flung himself out of the chair and paced across my small office, hitting his head with his fist. I was beginning to get scared. Perhaps he was more psychotic than I realized and I was making him worse.

"Maybe," I said tentatively, "you'd better go back to telling me what you thought the word meant, or what the name applies to."

He stopped in front of the window, which had a view of Central Park. "Look out there at the world. Reality. Trees and grass and

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stones—and people—maybe I don't like people much, although I do get along better, and my fiancée thinks I'm getting terrific in bed, and I've got all these ideas for research into computer technology . . ."

I waited. He babbled on and then sat down again, staring into the middle distance. He looked as if he were listening, and not to me.

He sighed. "I can't figure out the dream. And I am going crazy. I suppose it's off to Bellevue Psycho."

"Don't be silly," I snapped countertransferentially. "You'll have a worse time figuring out the dream if you're inside a hospital."

His eyes widened. "Do you think I'm acting crazier and crazier to impress Stuffy and you with how helpless I feel? To make you put me away so I won't have to do anything but work on the mantrum?"

"Admirably reasoned. Are you now saying that the noise was a mantrum?"

"No. I don't know. I might as well tell you the rest of what I've been thinking. Then you'll really send me to Bellevue."

"Sending people to Bellevue against their will isn't usually done unless they are suicidal or homicidal; and even if you were both, I might have a little trouble taking you there, since you're bigger than I am. What's the truth?"

He seemed to relax, now that I had declared my human frailty. "I'll try to tell you, if I can. You see, I'm scared by the noise I heard, and I don't know if it's the implications of what the word or name could mean, or of what could be saying the word, or of what I'm like if it's just coming out of me. Sitting here with you I've realized that poor Stuffy couldn't help me answer those questions, and you can't. Nobody can. I have to decide for myself."

"Or you could just forget it and go about daily life."

"But you don't understand! If I forget, somebody else may happen on it and do something great with it. Win the Nobel prize or something. I have to confess that I have a yen to win the Nobel prize, but so do all my colleagues."

"So?"

"You're right. Now let me try to get into my reasoning, simplified for your intelligence." Nemo leaned toward me again, lecturing as if he were an elderly professor. "Let's begin with the idea that if the noise is just a noise, then it takes intelligence—in this case, human intelligence—to turn the noise into a name."

"I'm following you so far," I said rather bitterly.

"Good. Now if the act of naming is an act that confers or evokes power, then if anybody duplicates the noise correctly or names whatever it is we're naming, then *Something Will Happen!*"

As I have recounted previously, I have had vast experience with

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people who speak in capitalized words, to say nothing of italics; and I strongly suspected that Nemo was thinking in both.

"Oh well," I said, yawning slightly to indicate that he'd have to do better than that to get me anxious, "I suppose you have a few fantasies about that."

Nemo grabbed his hair with his hands. "Now don't imagine that I believe anything as downright crazy as the idea that by pronouncing the name I'll turn into a god, because that's not how it felt. In the dream, when I tuned in to the noise and said it back as if it were a name, I knew that suddenly there was something listening. Worst of all, I had the feeling that I had *caused* it to be able to listen!"

"What do you have in mind about that?" I asked in the approved analytic response.

Nemo bit his lip. "Suppose the word is actually a call signal for an intelligent alien race?"

"That's a rather hackneyed SF plot, but I suppose that wouldn't mean anything to your unconscious."

"Very funny. Explain away my awful memory of feeling that whatever was listening was very, very big."

I yawned again.

Nemo ground his teeth and seemed about to burst forth in anger at me when he looked stunned. "I was so angry with you that it must have jarred loose my memory, because I've remembered something else from the dream. There was the awful suspicion that the listener—that gigantic entity—was also myself. Is this just galloping grandiosity?"

"Possibly. You seem like a good candidate for it. But perhaps your giant brain can think of something in addition to that."

Nemo shook his head despairingly and leaned back, staring off into space to my right, where there happens to be a bookcase.

"I see you have some books on Zen," he said.

"Yes. Does that bring anything to mind?"

"I'm into Zen myself. I suppose you're hinting that I am part of the universe, and maybe it is rather grandiose of me to think of myself as naming the totality, conferring a title upon it as it comes alive . . . wow! Am I psychotic enough to believe that I'm making the universe come alive by giving it a name? A perfect name?"

"It sounded to me as if you meant, earlier, that the noise you heard had always been there and you tuned in."

"That's right. But you're the psychiatrist! Aren't you going to insist that I made the whole thing up? After all, the dream is my invention, isn't it?"

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"Yes, but I can't help remembering that scientists often have strange dreams that incorporate aspects of their thinking about reality, aspects they haven't become conscious of yet. Remember Kekule deciphering the structure of the benzene ring after dreaming about a snake that grabbed its own tail?"

"Okay, okay. I'm a genius, but I'm still scared. My imagination is going wild. How do we know what the universe is going to be like when it's a live, conscious entity?"

"Damned if I know. Aren't you really worrying about your own sense of magical power?"

He laughed. "The funny thing is that other people think geniuses have magical power, but they don't. What I felt in the dream was magical maybe only in the sense of being beyond ordinary science. That's what I've always wanted, to be the sort of scientist who goes far beyond the science of his own day. Is that what all this boils down to, simple wish-fulfillment?"

"That would be convenient," I said. "Have you told me everything about the dream?"

The smile died on his face. "Hell. You've made me remember one more thing. It was—hell, I won't believe that. It's not important."

"Your time is almost up. Maybe for completeness' sake you'd better say—"

"Oh hell, all right. It doesn't fit anyway with our beautiful theory of intelligence as part of the Universe coming alive. I like that, and I think I can find a use for it. Maybe eventually I'll be able to reproduce the sound perfectly and pass it on for others to play with. In the meantime, Stuffy will just have to keep himself from going 'round the bend—"

"What!"

"I forgot to tell you. I think I injured Stuffy in some way when I reproduced the sound almost perfectly for him. I don't know why. But I have faith in him. He's sane and not too dumb and he'll be all right."

I was beginning to grind my own teeth. "What were you going to say that you remembered?"

"Oh, it was nothing. By the way, did you ever read Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God'?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Great story, but that's not how things are going to be. The universe won't end if that name I heard is duplicated correctly, because to paraphrase the old joke, there isn't any God and He's not going to notice. Nevertheless, when intelligence has a readily usable way of tuning into ultimate reality, when the name begins to *Work,* then

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watch out, Universe!"

"You still haven't told me—"

Nemo stood up. "Thanks for the interesting consultation. I now see that I was never crazy to begin with. And don't worry about whether or not it was *our* Universe I named and awakened to consciousness. I could just as easily have invented an open sesame to unlock the door to another Universe, although I think it doesn't really matter. I can hardly wait to tell Stuffy that I don't have to go to Bellevue. I just have to get to work."

Stopping at the door, he smiled shyly. "Do you mind if I try to reproduce the sound again?"

"Well, no; but you still haven't told me what you remembered about the dream."

"Sure I did." Nemo wrapped his arms together over his chest, stood up straight and seemed to let the mysterious word issue from his throat. It was not, I instantly realized, quite the same.

He looked at me, winked, and left.

"You've finished?" said the Oldest Member as the other Pshrinks hastily downed the dregs of their coffee and pushed aside the remains of dessert—Doughnuts Dysphagia.

"Not quite," said the Interpersonal, watching as the Pshrinks began to push back their chairs too.

The Oldest Member rapped a spoon sharply upon his water glass. "If there's more, I want to hear it. I am certain that the intrapsychic structure of . . ."

One of the other Interpersonals sighed and said, "Did Nemo end up in a hospital?"

"Yes," said the Oldest Member grudgingly, "what are the facts? Of course, in analyzing the case, it's obvious that the libidinal aberrations in the pre-schizophrenic dereistic thinking—"

"Nemo's not and never has been in a hospital," said the Interpersonal, picking up a doughnut. "I wonder if we too often examine the doughnut closely while forgetting to notice what's in the middle."

"Are you explaining or going into one of your Zen states?" asked one of the Eclectics.

"Sorry about that," said the Interpersonal. "You see, Nemo *did* tell me what he had suddenly remembered while sitting in my office. 'It was nothing,' he said. I think he meant it with a different emphasis, more like 'It was *Nothing*.' Not the doughnut but the hole."

"You aren't making any sense at all," said the O.M., pulling at one of his silver moustaches.

"That's what Nemo would undoubtedly say. He's doing fine, and is about to blast the world with the products of his years of research,

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according to an article I read in one of my husband's scientific journals. I think—I'm not positive—that he's concentrating on the doughnut."

The Oldest Member grabbed the other end of his moustache.

"Nemo's a fabulous success," said the Interpersonal hurriedly. "He's a millionaire already from his computer-science inventions and expertise. He's financed his own private research, which he says is about ready to be unveiled. I got a card from him last Christmas saying that I should take note of how useful his mysterious word was going to be."

"Bah!" said the O.M. "You expect us to believe that a noise he once dreamt could be useful without years of strict classical analysis?"

"Yes. Nemo's current work in artificial intelligence is on a machine apparently capable of speech, not only human sounds but also those no human throat can make. These robots have more than rudimentary thinking abilities, and their mental skills can develop as the artificial brain experiences life and, presumably, itself. I'd guess that Nemo expects the robots to be able to reproduce that name perfectly and thus leap faster into consciousness."

"But you said the word was a name that makes the whole Universe come alive," said a Jungian disconsolately.

"Oh, yes," said the Interpersonal airily, waving her hand as if to include and then dismiss the Universe, "but consider the other implications for all us little ripples in the fabric of the Universe. Suppose the name works because it tunes into nothingness—*any* nothingness—and gives it the urge to become somethingness?"

The Oldest Member abandoned the support of his moustaches and clutched at the unlit cigar that always lay within comforting view beside his plate.

"I suppose I should explain," said the Interpersonal, "although it's embarrassing."

The O.M. perked up. "There, there, m'dear. Be open. We hold everything in strictest confidence. What's a little neurosis among colleagues? Perhaps we can help you to insight."

"It's the possibility of instant insight that bothers me," said the Interpersonal, peering through the doughnut. "I don't mind pure nothingness so much. I'm not sure I want it *all* to turn into somethingness."

"She's off again," said one of her colleagues.

"I'd better tell you about Stuffy," said the Interpersonal contritely. "Shortly after my consultation with Nemo, Stuffy found himself another wife, suddenly shaped up as an analyst and graduated from

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analytic school, grew longer hair, wore interesting clothes, learned to cook exotic Chinese food, and went to another part of the country to found his own analytic institute."

"What's that got to do with Nemo's alien word, or with nothingness?" said the Oldest Member.

"I'm convinced that when Stuffy heard Nemo's word, he heard it to the core of himself, and it changed his life. I think the word names not only the Taoistic nothingness of the entire universe of reality, but tunes into the nothingness of each person. Tunes into both what isn't there and what is potentially there."

"You mean . . ."

"Poor old Stuffy. Getting thoroughly in touch with one's own stuffy emptiness must have been a galvanizing experience. Nemo doesn't realize that happens because he doesn't recognize his own emptiness as anything terrible. He's a genius scientist, and to him emptiness is exciting—something from which form emerges, something which can be filled, and named."

"But how do you know?" said the Oldest Member.

"Unfortunately, I don't," said the Interpersonal, crumbling the doughnut. "I only know what it felt like when Nemo stood in my doorway and repeated the sound of the name. For an agonizing moment I knew exactly who and what I was and could be, bad and good. Being human, I immediately forgot, or repressed, everything but a vague impression, but that was enough to accelerate my own personal analysis."

"Then what are you worried about?" asked the O.M., tasting a doughnut crumb.

"Nemo's robots will pronounce the name perfectly. What will that do to us humans?"

"Make Pshrinks busier," said the O.M. complacently. "And there's no evidence that hearing the name definitely made you any less or more impossible than you always were."

The Interpersonal kissed him on his left moustache. "You ought to think about going into psychoanalysis for robots. I think you'd be good at it, and they may need it."

"Why?"

"If I read the information about Nemo correctly, those robots of his will be able to pronounce the word easily. They and they alone. And what happens when they become intelligent enough to get instant insight and start thinking about potentials to emerge from their own emptiness? Does the universe deserve . . ."

"It certainly deserves everything it gets," said the O.M. "And now, in view of the interesting nature of this case presentation, I think

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we should vote on having Nemo as a luncheon speaker, bringing sound-producing equipment or even a robot or two . . ."

"What a great idea!" said the Interpersonal. "We could all get in touch with our own stuffiness!"

There was a frantic scramble as the other Pshrinks all headed for the exit.

SOLUTION TO HUMPTY FALLS AGAIN
(from page 37)

To read the curious lettering on the looking-glass wall, turn the page upside down and hold it up to a mirror.

I had no trouble answering Humpty's question. After all, the egg was only a figment of my dream, and I myself had invented the puzzle a few weeks before. But the egg seemed a bit miffed.

"Well, you can't win 'em all," he said sadly. "But before I let you go, see what you can make of this riddle. I thought of it while I was cooking your mushroom. What's the longest word in . . ." He paused, raised both hands, and wiggled two fingers on each side of his huge face to indicate quotation marks. ". . . the English language." He made two more quote signs in the air.

"Hmmm," I mused. "I'm really not sure. Of course I remember some old joke answers. *Rubber*, because if it isn't long enough you can stretch it. And *smiles*, because there's a mile between the first and last letter. And *endless*, because there's no end to it. And . . ."

"All old chestnuts," Humpty interrupted angrily. "My words always mean just what I want them to mean. The answer is in every pocket dictionary."

See page 135.

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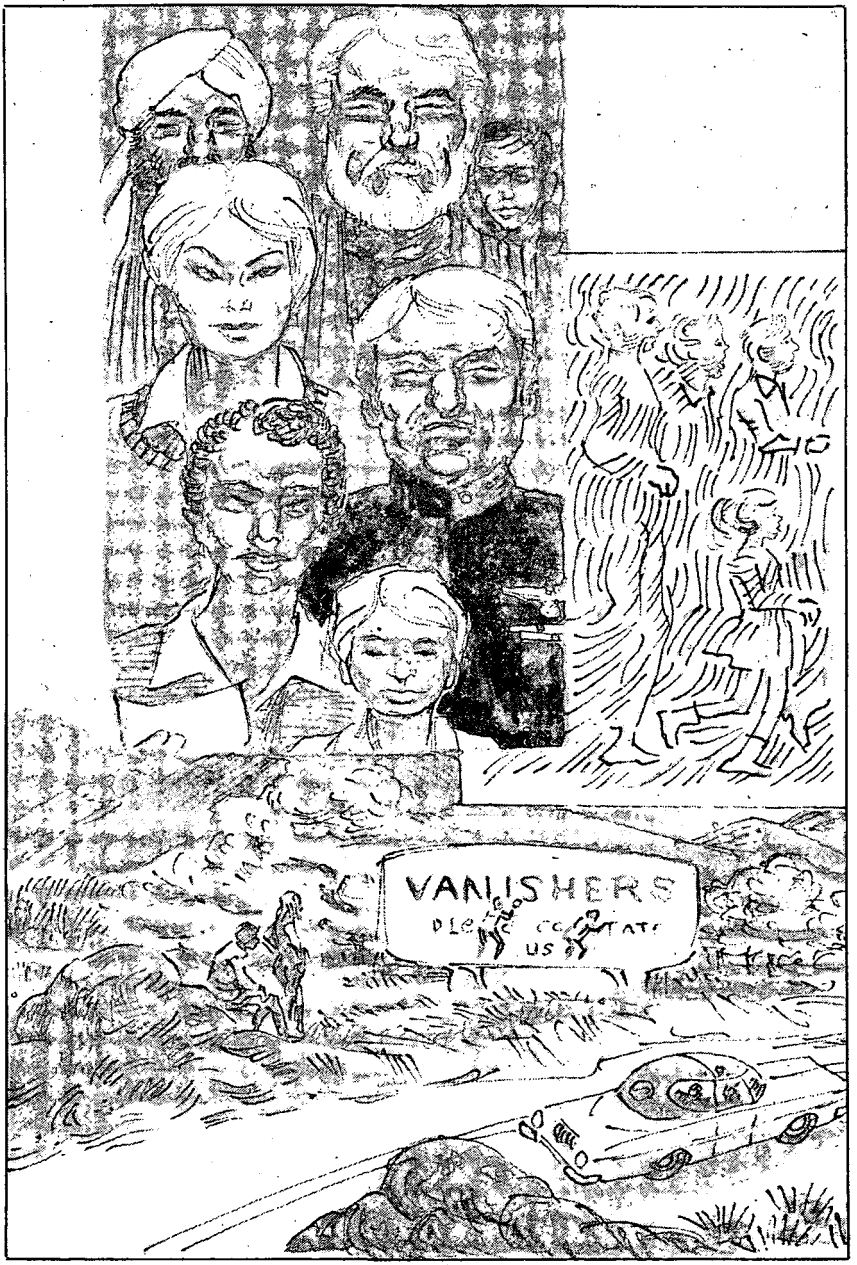

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CO-EXISTENCE

by David Brin

art: Leo Summers

Dr. Brin tells us that he just got his Ph.D. in Applied Physics from the University of California at San Diego, with a dissertation on asteroids and comets. His one novel, *Sundiver,* is in a third printing from Bantam Books. He likes to backpack, give blood, and argue politics.

"There is a theory which states that
if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for
and why it is here,
it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something
even more bizarre and inexplicable."
—Douglas Adams

I don't think anyone knows exactly when it began. It seemed a fatal disease, at first. Dozens, possibly hundreds were buried or cremated before the ComaSlow epidemic was recognized for what it was.

It was a pseudo-death that struck without warning. There was no precursor, no symptom that gave a clue to its coming.

Its victims were often found in bed, apparently asleep, yet rigid and unrousable. They were discovered on sidewalks, vacant-eyed and poised precariously in mid-stride. At office desks the ComaSlow were found staring blankly at papers, pencils poised above undotted i's.

These corpses remained warm. Under careful scrutiny, they were found to consume oxygen and give off carbon dioxide. Their stiffness shared only one attribute with rigor mortis . . . an adamant resistance to motion.

Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. Soon a public investigation was launched.

Several weeks after the epidemic was recognized, the wheels of government reaction creaked far enough to pull me into this mess. By the time the Emergency Management Agency got around to drawing from its "Crackpot Consultant" list, I had seen the New

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Death strike several acquaintances, two close friends, and—before my eyes—my agent.

Harold Carpis was treating me to lunch at Goldfarb's, a medium-priced restaurant not far from his office, where he traditionally took his clients in the "bright, young and promising" category.

I had barely touched my steak, so involved was I with my own brilliance. I made grand gestures with my hands, telling Harold about my idea for another "Harold Feebooter" novel.

Carpis ate slowly, as a rule, and spoke little over a meal. He had a tendency to pause and consider beforehand when he did comment. Because of this, it was hard for me to tell exactly when the change occurred. I noticed that he had taken on a particularly bemused expression, a forkful of chef's salad midway to his mouth. He looked my way attentively, but when I shifted in my seat I saw that his gaze didn't follow me.

I never did find out what Hal thought of my novel. It was a pretty good idea, if I do say so. Naturally, it never got written.

One stricken day later I was awakened early by a pounding on my door. Bleary-eyed, I opened to two very large, very starched Military Policemen.

"Are you Daniel Brand, the sci-fi writer?" the larger of the two asked.

"Um, that's Science Fiction. . . . Besides, I write a lot of fact articles . . . too."

I was speaking on automatic pilot. Here were two big MPs on my doorstep, and I was giving them one of my standard cocktail party responses. Rise and shine.

"Sorry, sir. Science Fiction. I'll remember that. Now, Mr. Brand, we have orders to ask you to come with us. Your special commission with the Office of Emergency Management has been activated."

I must have stared like a dummy.

All that was getting through to me was that I was about to be taken somewhere by two Brobdignagians with guns . . . and before my morning orange juice!

At this point, one of my characters would have drawn his laser pistol . . . or spoken up loudly so that the robot doorbell could later tell his best friend what had happened. Or he'd coolly disarm his would-be captors and escape out the bathroom window. I managed to surpass those schemes by grunting, "My what?"

"Your special commission with the Emergency Management Agency, sir. You've been receiving a yearly emolument to keep your name and address on a list of unconventional consultants for hy-

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pothetical national crises.

"Surely you remember, sir?"

Never let anyone tell you a giant can't fit his mouth around twenty-dollar words.

I did remember, at last. My yearly stipend had been a paltry one hundred dollars a year, ten percent going to Hal because it had been his idea to have me sign up. In exchange I agreed to advise my country should little green men ever land, or dinosaurs rise up out of the sea . . . and I promised to drop a card to a bored corporal in a small office in the Pentagon sub-basement should I ever move. The program had been budgeted twenty years in advance by one of our recent, workaholic presidents, when he found out the U.S. didn't have a game plan in the event a giant comet or something was discovered headed for the Earth. I think he used money stolen from the White House janitorial budget.

"They want me," I said.

"Yessir," the erudite truncheon-wielder confirmed. "Now if you'll please get dressed . . . ?"

I was allowed to take my briefcase and a toothbrush. The rest "would be provided when I joined the crisis team."

As we left my apartment building, we saw two ambulances pull away, carrying a few more of the night's catatonics. The bystanders watched with none of the typical detachment of New Yorkers. One could tell they were afraid.

"Am I finally going to meet Carl Sagan?" I asked as the MPs hustled me into a green government Plymouth.

"Nossir," the one with the vocabulary answered. "I believe he's already become a victim. The computer chose you as the surviving consultant with the best set of qualifications. We're now taking you to the main medical team at Johns Hopkins, where they are expecting you."

That's how I became a bigshot in the investigation of the ComaSlow near-death. A computer picked me. I remember thinking that there must have been a lot of victims, already, for the poor machine to have gotten so hard up.

The hospitals were in chaos. Chronic care units were filled to overflowing with immobile humanity. Armories and high school gymnasia were converted to handle the growing number of victims.

The symptoms were frightening.

Physicians listened to heartbeats that dragged on, lonely and deep, for over a minute per. They worried over eyes that refused to blink,

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yet remained somehow moist. They despaired over encephalograms whose spikes could be counted in single neuron flashes, adding up to a complex pattern that was . . . normal!

But most disconcerting of all was each patient's facial expression. In its glacial rigidity, each visage bore none of the calm mindlessness one might expect from a catatonic. There was no balm of sleep. Instead, most of the victims gradually assumed a mask of pitiably frozen, and apparently intelligent, panic.

The appellation "ComaSlow" had been given when it was discovered that the patients retained some vestigial powers of movement. Left unwatched for a night, a victim was often found, later, on his feet near his bed, like a statue of a man or woman trying to walk away. Occasionally two of the stricken would be disclosed by the morning light facing each other, eyes apparently focused, one or both with mouth half-open, in a frozen tableau of mock, furtive conversation.

The epidemic had struck 1 in 200 by the time I joined Unit Prime. The ratio was 1 in 55, a month later. It was becoming nigh impossible to care for and restrain so many patients. Intravenous feeding was stretching the medical establishment to its limit.

That was the situation the day Dr. Hunter and I walked into a Task Force meeting with our results. I opened the door for her, but I didn't accompany Hunter to the head of the table. After one month I was still a bit of an alien element here . . . in spite of the powers and confidence granted me by the computers of the EMA.

Hunter hefted a sheaf of scrawled notes and drawings above the heavy, oak table.

"These were all written by our patients!" she announced. She sent the sheaf floating chaotically down the polished surface, leaving a scattered trail of papers along its path. The doctors picked these up and looked at them.

Hunter motioned toward me as she addressed the group.

"You all recall how hard Commissioner Brand and I had to work to persuade you to let some of the victims alone, with pencils and paper? Well, these are the results of that experiment. Left unbothered, they produced these documents!"

Most of the scratchings were pathetic—the sort a normal person might scrawl if kept in solitude, constantly abused and prodded by remote, capricious powers.

One page was different. The message was clearly, if hurriedly

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printed. In clear block letters it read:

WHO ARE YOU?
DO YOU KNOW ENGLISH?
WE WISH YOU NO HARM!
PLEASE REPLY SLOWL

The note ended abruptly. Hunter explained that a nurse, concerned that the patient's bedding had not been changed in almost two days, had intervened, destroying the last sentence.

The others looked from Hunter to me, perplexed.

"Don't you see?" I cried out in frustration. "This fellow is obviously intelligent and patient. With extraordinary resourcefulness he has tried to cram a brief message into what must have been to him barely an instant, in order to communicate with the all-powerful, invisible beings who are holding him prisoner! We move too fast, from his point of view, even to be seen! He thinks we're extraterrestrials, perhaps. How else could he rationalize what's happening to him?

"One moment he's walking down the street. Then, in a blur, he suddenly finds himself in a hospital bed, pummelled and poked every few seconds, his limbs arbitrarily rearranged for him, and his every movement thwarted!"

One elderly pandemicist scratched his head. "Are you saying that these catatonic individuals aren't really sick at all? That they are competent, if tremendously slowed?"

I looked at Hunter in despair. This was just what we had been trying to tell them for two weeks.

Hunter interrupted. I suppose she wanted to make certain I didn't louse things up with my temper.

"Yes, Dr. Everson," she said. "And this leads us to the conclusion that this epidemic is not a medical problem at all, but one calling for the expertise of physical scientists . . . and perhaps psychics and holy men. Maybe even sci-fi writers, as well."

I grimaced at that, but kept my trap shut.

She could tell that this was coming a bit too thick and fast for the venerable physicians present, so she hurried on to the sugar coating.

"It has also occurred to us, ladies and gentlemen, that this offers a fine way out of the crisis we are fast approaching . . . that of too few hospital beds and overworked medical staff. The idea, once you get used to it, is quite appealing. . . ."

She was right, of course, on all counts. The immediate problem

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of care and maintenance would be solved soon. Just in time, as a matter of fact. For while we debated, the second whammy had already struck.

The new phenomenon began, a month after the onset of the ComaSlow epidemic, with a series of very strange deaths—or rather "disappearances." People simply vanished. Poof.

And no sooner was the first vanishing noticed than the practical jokes began.

Barking dogs appeared, as if instantaneously teleported, on the desks of stuffy senior executives. Men and women walking down the street suddenly found their clothes gone, as if vaporized in the wink of an eye. Burglar alarms went off all over town and food vanished from plates in every fancy restaurant.

Some atrocities occurred. The worst was when a jetliner crashed. Someone apparently lassoed its landing gear with a steel cable when it was ten feet into the air on takeoff. Nobody saw it happen, or even glimpsed the culprit.

A number of famous and beautiful women disappeared from public places, to be found minutes later, at points across town, somewhat bruised and disheveled, with no recollection of anything but a chaotic blur.

Some people who had been enemies of certain "vanishers" met gruesome ends, as did several politicians and the head of nearly every organized crime family.

But in light of the theory we were developing, we were surprised at how little damage was being done . . . considering what the Vanishers were capable of, and their growing numbers.

The burglar alarms, for instance, often led to discovery that someone had simply been "poking around." Little of value was taken. Normal criminals often found themselves "teleported" directly to prison. At least that's how it appeared to the dazed police.

Will I be forgiven a slight understatement if I say that the average citizen did not need this aggravation, in addition to his fear over being the next ComaSlow victim?

The man on the street, subject at any moment to the whim of some entity who might stick itching powder down his back or a garter snake down his pants, began to take on the same helpless, panicky look we had become accustomed to seeing on our patients at Johns Hopkins.

We brought in the physicists, all right. And the psychics and mystics and "sci-fi" writers, as well. They just about killed each other, screaming for Zeitgeist priority, but finally they all agreed

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on one thing. We were experiencing a profound and irksome muckup in *time*.

Great. Hunter and I had already figured that out.

To everyone's immense relief, our suggestion on how to solve the ComaSlow problem temporarily appeared to work, at least. Instead of treating the victims as sick people, we simply turned them loose and let them run the hospitals themselves.

Soon there were whole villages set aside for their use. MPs guarded the perimeters and inspectors dropped by once every week or two to check on things and to deliver food. Otherwise, the ComaSlow soon were coping quite well.

The Slow towns were eerie places, for all of that. Those permitted to visit them felt as if they had come upon a place where some mad, prolific sculptor had run amuck, leaving utterly lifelike renderings of people going about their business: cooking meals, eating them . . . someone coming back a week later might see the same statue washing the dishes.

If only the problem of the Vanishers had been as easy to solve.

Hunter and I dragged a card table and typewriter to a spot beneath the most prominent billboard in town. We'd hired two signpainters noted for their speed, and given them a message to write.

When we'd had the idea, we realized that there wasn't a moment to lose. A minute wasted was a day to the Vanishers. Still and all, I was glad I'd spent the moment it took to grab a bottle of scotch on our way out of my apartment. Sitting there beneath the billboard, I took a healthy belt, then passed the bottle to her as we watched the painters write:

VANISHERS! PLEASE CONTACT US!

No sooner was the line finished than did Hunter, the signpainters, and I suddenly feel our clothes disappear. I experienced a burning sensation, as if very fine sandpaper had been quickly rubbed against my arms and legs. Hunter jumped up and cried out.

This wasn't what we'd had in mind as "contact," but it was a beginning.

I had warned the signpainters what to expect. I was proud of those guys. They jumped briefly in surprise then grimly went back to work, painting our message in their birthday suits.

The next line went:

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TALK! BE KIND! WE'RE KIND TO THE COMASLOW! WE'RE READY TO

They didn't finish the line before another flurry of activity hit us. In an instant my head was shaved bare. Dr. Hunter's beautiful mammaries were painted a brilliant blue, as were . . . ahem . . . parts of my own anatomy; and a maelstrom of scrawled notes rose from the stack of paper next to my typewriter. The messages jammed and flurried in front of my face, holding still barely long enough for me to catch a flavor of derision.

Then, in two seconds, the paper storm was interrupted. I had the briefest glimpse of one, no, two unconscious men lying on the sidewalk. They vanished quickly, and in the same instant my limbs were jerked about and I found myself back in my own clothes.

The cyclone of paper resumed, a little slower and apparently more conciliatory in tone. I guessed that we had been rescued from the first bunch of Vanishers by a second, more responsible group.

As quickly as I could, I typed:

GET ORGANIZED! HOLD NOTES STILL LONGER! I AM EMPOWERED, IN THE NAME OF THE UN EMERGENCY TASK FORCE, TO DEPUTIZE A RESPONSIBLE PERSON AS

The note disappeared, then instantly reappeared with the words "a responsible person" crossed out and "HERMAN WUNKLER" inserted.

I had to think for two seconds. To Herman Wunkler it must have been a long hour.

I recognized the name as that of a philosophy professor at Crosstown College. He was over fifty years old, before he vanished. He had a reputation as a bright teacher and an easy grader.

What all that implied was good enough for me. I finished typing the order authorizing Wunkler to organize the Vanishers along lines parallel to the normal constitutional channels, with a quasi-martial charge to protect and consult us normals however possible.

On typing the last period, I found a pen in my hand, poised above the bottom of the page. I signed quickly. If Wunkler had been able to watch me all this time, he must already have a fair-sized band of followers to help him. It would take them little time to find and ransack the right government offices to verify my authority.

I counted the seconds as I turned to give thumbs up to Hunter.

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She smiled back at me, confidently.

At a count of eight a cold beer suddenly appeared in my left hand. A lit cigar (my favorite brand) popped into the other. Dr. Hunter started a little when our cardtable was replaced by a huge mahogany desk and our folding chairs by plush recliners.

With a bright, striped canopy overhead, Hunter and I labored for two hours to speed-read a chain of reports that appeared before our eyes like tachistoscope images. We quickly learned a technique to show YES or NO answers with a wink of either eye.

In one hundred minutes we had a social order set up. All at once, all over the country, the practical jokes virtually stopped.

Naturally, we had to begin a total rewrite of physical law.

By all rights the Speedoes (as the Vanishers were soon called) should have burnt up from their own superfast metabolisms, if not from simple air friction as they moved. The Slows (as the ComaSlow were now called) should have fallen over, mid-stride, every time they took a step.

A mind could find more than enough boggles if it looked for them.

Somehow we sorted things out. More people went fast or slow. We started dividing the cities into zones set aside for each speed. A barter economy developed, with computers used for communication.

We counted on the fast ones for protection, and it appeared to be working. Speedo policemen watched over us. Speedo firemen kept us from harm.

Hunter wasn't optimistic, though, and I could see her point. At this rate, wouldn't three separate races develop? How many generations would it take for the accelerated to forget their kinship with Normals, or Normals their responsibility to the Slows?

She and I had only a couple of months to think about it. Soon word came "down" that Professor Wunkler had died at age one hundred and two. Next the computers told us of a growing panic among our faster cousins.

I swear, it never occurred to me that the process might continue!

A certain fraction of the Fast were now leaping even *faster* along the timetrack! The practical jokes that began again were mostly visited upon the "merely Fast." The new "Superfast" apparently thought it a bore to mess up statues who couldn't react during their lifetimes, so they mostly left the Normals and the Slows alone.

We had to invent new terminology. The new level of Speedoes was called Fastrack II. It took years, from our point of view, for our cousins in Fastrack I to negotiate an arrangement such as Hunter

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and I had negotiated with *them*. Then our cities were divided into fourths. When the Slows had *their* branching we divided again.

A number of physicists, who had thought they'd figured out what was going on, went mad, committed suicide, or quietly changed professions.

Once I considered the possibility that the Universe at one time truly *did* circle around the Earth . . . that ancient philosophers were *right* in their cruder models of reality, with their simple crystal spheres and pinholes in a velvet sky. Perhaps there were Powers which, once mankind was about to understand his cage and find out the rules, frustrated him by the simple expedient of expanding the possible.

Hunter and I have three children now. In an odd way we have what every parent who ever loved his kids secretly wanted, and without any effort by us. In Emma, Cassandra, and Abel we have a covey of dreams come true.

Abel is our oldest child. He made the transition to Fasttrack I a full three weeks before his sister Cassandra, and Hunter and I, were caught up in our own shift to the same level.

During those weeks he was brought up by some pleasant people; and he became a fine man—strong, intelligent, and kind. After we joined him, he introduced us to our nearly grown grandchildren.

I said Cassandra came with us, didn't I? Yes, she's a wonderful child . . . a lot of fun and always springing surprises upon us. She's aggravating and delightful and grows day by day before our eyes. Hunter and I are convinced she'll always be with us . . . at least for the remainder of her childhood.

Emma was the prettiest of our children. "Was" is a bad word, for she'll be beautiful and seven for the rest of our lives. She was left behind when we made the shift. No one knows any way to control the passage among the timelines, so we had to accept it.

No matter. One becomes philosophical. We carried her, with a note pinned to her sweater, to our friends the Neales, who are as nice as can be. We pop by, from time to time, just to look in on our baby. Whatever she does, her hair is brushed. Hunter insists, even when we find Emma sliding between bases in Little League. I sigh about "meddling," but I know she likes to know we're there. To her we'll be there for so little time.

Besides, the traffic goes both ways now, haphazard as it is. Someday Emmie, too, might leave the Main Timeline, and be reunited with us.

Which *is* the Main Timeline? I wonder. We've tried to be careful

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to keep track, but can we be sure? By what units could we measure this change?

Our worries of a tyranny of the Fast were mostly for naught. The new timelines seem to appear every decade or so, from the point of view of the line farthest "forward" . . . meaning they come into existence every few milliseconds from my present perspective.

It makes no logical sense. None at all, by the old premises. But somehow there are people to populate the lines, and room for all.

People flow back and forth across the streams like fish caught in different parts of the same river, some swept by swift currents, and others drifting slowly near the shore. We trade and cross-fertilize. The inventions that filter down are wonderful, but we always seem to have something of value to trade for them. Somehow we all seem to remain human.

Hunter and I go nowhere without each other. It may be superstition, but we feel that if you grab someone you love and hold him tight, when you feel the change coming on, you'll shift time tracks together.

I hope so. I have meditated long and hard on this, while doing my stints of guard duty, protecting one of the slower sections. (I also consult for the Fasttrack I government, now. They think highly of me, here. Something like a reincarnated Benjamin Franklin. There is even a small market for my science fiction, though the heyday of that genre appears to be past.)

In my meditation I notice that a new way of thinking has begun to replace the old. I see the sun rise every morning. A mockingbird buzzes by my head whenever I wander past the tree that holds her nest. Each year the leaves change color and the Fasttrack I farmers gather their harvest.

How can a day be a day on each timeline? Does the mockingbird buzz for my Fast and Slow neighbors, as well?

How can the lines keep multiplying? Will there be a time when it all comes full circle? When the slowest of the Slow meet the fastest of the Fast, and send a chain of practical jokes down the pike, growing in power and bad taste at every pass around the loop?

These are questions the old logic might have asked, and I know they are false. The River is legend. Its tributaries merge, far downstream from the glacier where once a trickle was all we knew.

How smug we have all become, in our adaptability. We claim to understand, to be at *home* on the great river!

Yet it widens, and deepens, as it flows.

And eventually there is the Sea.

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EARTHSCAPE

by Robert F. Young

art: Bob Walters

Like many SF writers, Mr. Young has worked at many jobs—with the possible exception of construction work on the slopes of Olympus Mons. But then, who are we to say for sure...?

I am from Mars.

I say this because I spent ten years there helping to build the domed complex for the first American colony.

Not years as they are measured on Mars, but years as they are measured on Earth. But even Earth years can be long.

Yes. Ten long years.

Most people stare at me when I tell them this. They think I am crazy. Why would anyone in his right mind voluntarily spend ten long years on Mars?

The answer is simple: For the money.

And for the priority. I can name any civil-service job I want and it will be mine for the asking.

Well, the complex is built now, and I am back on the planet I came from. I am forever free from the bitter winds of Mars, from the bleak Martian landscapes; from the slow relentless rising of Olympus Mons that confronted me each morning when I crawled outside my air tent.

I am back now in the land where I was born. Back in the little town that once for me was the whole wide world. I am back where I belong.

"Gosh, you look great," my father says as we shake hands. My mother kisses me. "It's wonderful to have you home."

My uncle, who has stopped in because of my return, asks, "What are your plans now, Neil?"

I shake my head. "I just want to rest for a while."

"I don't blame you!" says my father. "Working all those years on

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that damned complex!"

"What are they going to use it for?" asks my mother.

"People are going to live there."

"Crazy people," my uncle remarks.

I nod. "I guess you're right."

It is summer, and I like the way our backyard looks from the window of my upstairs room. It is a vivid green from the last rain, and patterned with beds of my mother's flowers. My father must have recently cut the grass, for it is carpet-flat, with not a weed protruding. There is a white fence around the backyard. It is freshly painted.

I feel that I must belong here. In this middle-class neighborhood. In this small middle-class town. On Mars I often dreamed of the town and the house and the backyard. Of my room up under the eaves. When they asked me if I would like to stay and become part of the colony, I laughed at them.

They can shove Mars.

I can hear the voices of my mother and my father and my uncle coming from downstairs. Presently I hear a different voice. A vaguely familiar one. It is rich and full, like afternoon sunlight. "Neil, you've got company," my mother calls up the stairs.

I go down to the living room. Yes, it is she. Judy. Judy Dalms. She runs over and kisses me. The scent of her is all around me, and oddly it is this that I remember most. More than her titian hair and dark-blue gaze. More than the dimple in her right cheek. More than her demure smile. We were lovers long ago. But she should not have kissed me. It has been too many years.

And surely she must be married by now.

We go walking. Around the block. It is afternoon and a warm wind is coming down from the green hills that rise beyond the lowlands. The wind is in her hair, in her walk, in her words. "Yes. I was married. But not any more."

She has three kids. Suzan, Kevin and Carl. The two boys are dying to meet me. They want to go to Mars. "I told them all about you," Judy says.

"Why do they want to go to Mars?"

"You know kids."

"They'll grow up."

"What are your plans now, Neil?"

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"I haven't any."

"You have priority on any government job you want."

"It was part of the package."

"I'm a working girl now. I work days at the supermarket and nights at the show. I took today off."

"Two jobs?"

"Three kids. You know how it is."

I do not know. "Your ex-husband—he must give you some support."

"Once in a blue moon I get a check."

We arrive presently back in front of my parents' house. Judy's electricar is parked at the curb. It is a tiny stationwagon. She gets behind the wheel. "Are you working at the show tonight?" I ask.

"It's only a weekend job."

"Maybe I'll drop by to meet your kids."

"They'll draw and quarter me if you don't."

"Where do you live now?"

"Where I used to. Mother's and Dad's."

My father is on vacation. We drive downtown for a beer. The business section has changed but little; it is a dual succession of block-like buildings with papier-mâché façades. The gin mill I used to go to has been transformed into a clothing store. We go to Big Charlie's. I remember him vaguely, and we shake hands. It is a dead time of day and there are only a few patrons, none of whom I know.

Charlie no longer waits on trade and has a barmaid behind the bar. She knows my father. "Day off, George?" she asks.

"Vacation," my father says.

"What're you doing? Painting your house?"

My father introduces me to her. Pat. I judge her to be about my age, but she does not show her years. She is slender at first glance, but then you begin to see the fullness of her hips and breasts. She has brown eyes which somehow are not in accord with her light blond hair, which is swept back and falls below her shoulders in meticulous braids. She tells me she used to be an ecdysiast. I wonder how she guessed my father is painting the house. It is true he is not painting it yet, but he is going to. I know, because I saw a ladder in the side yard and cans of paint on the back porch.

She buys us a drink because I have been to Mars. "You don't look like a Martian," she says. "Why'd you come back?"

"To help my father paint the house."

"I was right then. He is painting it."

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"Naturally. He's on vacation."

My mother has roast beef for supper. I wish she had not gone to the expense of buying real meat. She has made applejohn for dessert. She remembers how I loved it. It tastes strange now. Rations do something to your taste buds, although our Martian rations were good.

My aunt and uncle dine with us. "What are your plans, Neil?" my uncle asks again.

I shrug and say I haven't any.

My father has not asked me yet. But he will get to it soon.

I watch 3V for a while, then shower and shave and get into slacks and shirt and shoes from my pre-Martian days, and head for the Dalms' house. It is not far, I cover the distance easily. I am fully reaccustomed by this time to Earth's greater gravitation. The two boys are in the front yard. I must look like a Martian to them, for they run into the house, crying, "Mom, he's here, he's here!"

Judy meets me at the door and we go inside. She insists that I have coffee. Carl is seven, Kevin five. The little girl Suzan is only three. They are beautiful children; all of them have Judy's eyes. Carl wants to know what it is like on Mars. I tell him and Kevin about the Margaritifer Sinus, Tharsis Ridge—where the complex is located—and massive Olympus Mons. I tell them that the sky is yellowish pink instead of blue. To temper their fascination I tell them about the cold and bitter winds, and how "Martians" have to wear air masks whenever they are outdoors.

"Aren't there any real Martians?" Carl asks.

"I'm afraid there aren't."

"But weren't there Martians long ago?"

"There may have been. But they left no sign of themselves."

"I don't think I'd care to go there," Judy says.

"I would," says Carl.

"So would I," says Kevin.

"Don't worry about it," I tell Judy after they have gone to bed. "When they get older, they'll know better."

"You didn't."

"That's because I never grew up."

But this is not true. I went to Mars for the security it would give me on Earth.

We sit on the sofa, watching 3V. We have the house to ourselves, except for the kids. Her father also is on vacation, and he and her

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mother are spending two weeks at the Thousand Islands. Their house does not need painting. I am tempted to ask Judy whether her father painted it while on vacation last year, but I do not. I am not making a study of middle-class customs. It is immaterial to me when people paint their houses.

I know that if I say the word, or even hint that I am so inclined, Judy will take me upstairs to her room. I do neither. It is not that I do not want her, how could I help but want her after being without a woman so long? But there is a strange coldness in me that will not go away.

We kiss in the doorway when we say good-night, and she puts her arms around my neck. There is no coldness in her, but clearly she feels mine, for she draws away. I walk home beneath the summer stars.

I begin helping my father paint the house. When he finally asks me what my plans are, he does not do so directly. He says casually, as I am cutting a window sash, "There's a civil service exam for postal workers coming up in two weeks."

I do not say anything.

"For you it would just be a token, of course. Your priority automatically puts you first on the list. You wouldn't even have to pass."

"I could pass the damn thing."

"I know you could. The point is, you have to take it for your priority to work. Then, as soon as there's an opening, you'll be safe."

"Safe?"

"Security-wise. I know you've got a bundle from being on Mars, but it's not the same as a secure job, and what with the price of things who knows how long your money will last? This way, you'll be all set for life."

I say nothing more.

I stop into Big Charlie's one night for a beer. I run into people I used to know. Guys I went to school with. They all have pretty much the same thing to say—how they wish they'd gone to Mars. I tell them they still can if they want—that the Colonization Bureau is looking for volunteers. Oh, but they can't go now, they tell me, they're married and have kids. I tell them they can take their wives and kids with them, and they look at me as though I am out of my mind.

Pat is behind the bar. Tonight she has red hair. I marvel at how young she looks when her eyes tell me she is my age. She is like a

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girl just graduated from high school. I remark on the color of her hair, and she says, smiling, that no one knows which of her hairdos is really her own hair. I marvel at her smile. It is warm and confidential, as though we have known each other for years.

I buy her a drink and she buys one back. "I'm helping my father paint the house," I tell her.

"You're right back in the groove."

"How in hell did you get far enough outside this damned deal to see what makes its wheels turn?"

"You don't have to get outside it to see."

"I had to."

She laughs. "The view from Mars. And here it was, all the time, in your own backyard."

She waits on another customer and comes back. There is no coldness in me when I look at her. "What does Earth look like from far away?" she asks.

"It's a pretty blue star. What made you decide to take your clothes off for a living?"

"It gave me a charge."

"Nympho-exhibitionism?"

"I don't think so."

"Why did you stop?"

"I got married to a man who thought Christ was due back any day. He didn't want Christ to see me naked. It didn't work."

"You can start up again."

"I'm too old and fat."

"The moon is made of green cheese."

"I guess I don't want to start again. I go from town to town now, like I did before. Only now I only tend bar."

"On Mars when I got up mornings and went outside the first thing I'd see would be Olympus Mons."

"Tell me about it."

"It's like the state of Utah turned into a fifteen-mile high mountain. I thought I wanted to be free from it. Now, I don't know."

"You're free from it whether you want to be or not."

"Yes. I guess I am. I have to leave now. I have to get up early to paint the back porch."

Judy calls on her next day off. She and the kids are going on a picnic. Carl and Kevin asked her to ask me if maybe I might like to come along. My father and I have the paint job beat by this time. I tell her okay.

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She picks me up in her stationwagon. I can barely fit into it what with her and the three kids and the picnic basket. There is a state park five miles from town. Barbecues, picnic tables, bathhouses. The kids are ecstatic. They run around me, begging me to take them swimming. Especially Suzan, the little girl. I get into my suit and they get into theirs, Suzan with Judy's help, and I take them down to the beach while Judy gets one of the barbecues ready for grilling synthi-hot dogs and soy-bean burgers. Supervising the kids' activities gives me a proprietary air that I do not find altogether distasteful. I watch the little girl carefully. She squats in water half a foot deep and splashes delightedly. Carl and Kevin go out as far as they dare, to impress me. I tell them to swim closer to shore.

We eat at one of the picnic tables. It is a weekday, and we have the area pretty much to ourselves. It strikes me that Judy does not have a dog. "We had one," she tells me when I ask, "but it got run over. We're going to get another."

The kids grow sad at the mention of the dog. Spike, his name was. "We're getting an Irish setter this time," Judy says. "Although they cost an arm and a leg."

She has brought beer too. We sip it from biodegradable cans while the two boys play catch and Suzan fingers arabesques in the sand. I ask Judy, "Didn't you bring your suit?"

"Yes. But we should wait an hour before we swim."

The hour drifts by, and then all of us head for the lake. Man and woman and kids. Gaiety and laughter and much splashing. No dog, but dog is on way.

The warm sunlight seems to have banished my coldness, and after we return from the picnic I spend the evening with Judy. She fixes a light supper of potato salad and synthi-cold cuts. She puts Suzan to bed early, and afterward I tell the two boys more about Mars. They are practically sitting on my knee, and yet they are far away. I cannot understand this, because they are such beautiful children. After Judy sends them off to bed she sits down on the sofa beside me. I put my arm around her shoulders. Instantly the coldness comes back. The alienness. We kiss, but I know it isn't any good, and presently I make a lame excuse and leave. After I walk home I stand in the backyard looking up at the stars. I make out Mars. It is an orange pinprick in the sedate sky. I turn the cart around, hoping to get a better view of myself. If there were Martians and one of them lived on Earth for a long enough time, would he become an Earthman? My inverse ratiocination takes me nowhere. I am in an unex-

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plored area of extraterrestrial science. I leave Mars to rest in its celestial arbor, go inside and say good-night to my mother and father and go upstairs to bed.

My father has gone back to work at the post office. One evening he brings home an application for the upcoming civil-service exam. I fill it out dutifully and give it back to him. He has eleven years to go before he will be eligible for retirement. He is already looking forward to those years ahead. How shall he fill the long hours? He cannot paint the house every day. No doubt he will put in a vegetable garden. He has always had a farmer's thumb. There will be a kitchen garden in our backyard. And the house will gleam from innumerable coats of paint.

I touch Pat's hair. "Is it the real thing?"

"Why do you care?"

"Never mind why. Is it real?"

I have borrowed my father's car and we have gone to a drive-in and now we are parked on a bluff overlooking the lake. "Yes, it's real," Pat says.

"You have such nice hair. Why do you camouflage it with wigs?"

"To make myself diverse and fascinating. Charlie's trade has tripled since I've been here."

"They all ask you out over their beers, don't they."

"The way you did."

"Yes. The way I did."

"Most of them do." She looks at me, and I can see starlight on her face and the faintest hint of it in her eyes. "You're the only one I said yes to."

"Because I'm from Mars?"

"Maybe that was why."

"You're from Mars too. In a way."

"Is that why you asked me out?"

"I guess it was partially why."

We kiss, and I taste starlight on her lips. There is a blanket in the trunk, and I get it out and we spread it on the ground. We lie down upon it side by side. There is the indrawn-breath sound of the waves below, and around us the light of stars. "It really is my real hair," she whispers in my ear. I wonder where my coldness went. My alienness. No, my alienness is still with me. I have an alien in my arms. Man and woman and lake and starlight. And Mars, high, high above. Man and woman. Making love.

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"Judy called last night," my mother tells me as she fries my bacon. "She's such a nice girl."

"I'll have only one egg, Mom."

"She says she's having a cookout in her backyard tonight and the kids are hoping you'll be there."

Kevin and Carl and Suzan. And soy-bean burgers and synthi-hot dogs. And possibly corn-on-the-cob. It is part of the intricate scheme of things. Job, wife, kids, pension. Middle classdom. Only when war comes does the pattern shift, and then never for long. God created Earth for the middle class.

Why did He create Mars?

I do not go to the cookout. I go to Big Charlie's. When Pat closes for the night we go to her apartment. I tell her of the application I filled out. "They can't turn me down."

"Is that really why you went to Mars?"

"It was one of the inducements they offered. I couldn't go to college—not many middle-class people can afford to any more. But civil service is the next best thing. The trouble is, there are too many applicants. You have to get in the side door somehow."

"When you get your vacation will you paint your house?"

"Naturally."

We are sitting side by side on her bed. "I guess I'm cynical. When you take off your clothes the world seems to take its off too."

"Is that your real hair?"

"You know it isn't."

She pulls the wig off and shakes her head and lets her soft brown hair fall free. There isn't a degree of coldness in me when we kiss.

"The examination," my father tells me, "is at nine A.M. tomorrow. In the post-office basement."

"Judy called again," says my mother. "You're invited to her place for dinner. Her mother and father are back and she wants you to meet them. And oh, yes, there was another call. From the Colonization Bureau. They want you to call back."

I make the call. They tell me the quota is not full yet and ask me if I have changed my mind. I tell them Hell no.

I go to Judy's for dinner. I meet her mother and father. They are much like mine. For the occasion her mother serves real pork chops. Judy has baked an apple pie. All the kids have two slices apiece. I have only one. But it is a good pie. As we sit there at the table the

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scene seems to freeze in my gaze. Judy, her mother and father and the kids all take on marmoreal lines. I am in a room with statues. Only I am real. And then it is all over and the statues turn back into middle-class Americans eating apple pie.

After dishes, Judy and I go out and sit on the front-porch steps. Judy says, "I hear there's a postal workers' exam tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Your mother told me you're going to take it. I wish you luck."

"I'm not going to take it. I'm going back."

She becomes fascinated by a pebble near her foot. She keeps pushing it back and forth with the toe of her shoe. At length she says, "I guess I should have known."

I do not say anything. There is nothing I can say.

"Do you *like* it up there?" she asks.

"I thought I hated it. I guess I was wrong."

I say good-bye to her, to her parents and the kids. The boys have stricken looks on their faces. I kiss the little girl. There is no coldness in me when I kiss her. She does not know yet she is of Earth.

I say good-bye to my mother and father. My father says he understands. He does not. My mother cries. They had everything all figured out for me. My aunt and uncle come in, and I shake hands with my uncle and kiss my aunt. My uncle keeps staring at me when he thinks I am not looking. He thinks I am quite mad.

I go to say good-bye to Pat. She comes out from behind the bar. "I'm going too," she says. "If there's room for me."

"They'll make room."

In her apartment, packing, she says, "There aren't any strings."

"Maybe I want there to be."

"There aren't any if you don't."

"Why are you going?"

"I want to belong somewhere."

"Mars will take its clothes off too."

"Not if I don't take off mine."

I like the starlight on her face when at last the shuttle lifts us up among the stars. It is a fine face. There is strength and resolution beneath its symmetrical lines. She will become a fine Martian. Among the faces of the volunteers I see faces I have known before. They are the faces of some of the men who built the domed complex beneath the Martian moons. We Martians are going home.

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ANN ATOMIC, PSYCHOPATHOLOGIST

by Sharon Farber

art: Bob Walters

The author, a medical student, tells us that her schedule becomes ever more frantic. Luckily for us, she's still able to find time for little things like this one—the latest in a series of stories about Ann Atomic.

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Dr. Ann Atomic, of the department of Infernal Medicine of the Lunatech College of Physic and Chirurgery, was pleased to receive a visit from her old friend Hugo Mayhem, the noted expert on the anatomy and physiology of the astral body. As is the wont of mad scientists meeting for tea, they fell to gossipping about other mad scientists.

"I was on the island of Dr. Morose recently," Hugo remarked. "Sullen as ever, but of late he's become excessively mad. Chap hasn't the energy to do forbidden experiments, and he's quite given up any desire to conquer the world."

"How depressing," Ann commiserated. "More tea?"

"In fact, he devotes most of his time to inventing a device which will make one immune to pornography; calls it the Anti-bawdy. I think the fellow needs confinement in a shrink tank."

Ann said, "We've just recently opened a new psychiatric facility here at Lunatech. It's staffed by the finest mad doctors, mad nurses, parasympathetics, and disorderlies. Care for a tour?"

She led the way across the starlit courtyard toward a large, somber building. Pausing on the lawn, she introduced Hugo to a group of convalescent patients sporting the latest in casts, bandages, and reconstructive surgery. These were the Fossil Fools, paleontologists who had decided to finally settle the controversy over the body temperature of dinosaurs by means of field work in the Jurassic. Unappreciative of the thermometers, some dinosaurs had rather hotbloodedly taken offense.

Continuing on, Hugo and Ann passed a small cottage; seven identical handsome men with largish ears sat outside. "They were constructed by an undergraduate in the genetic engineering lab. We're keeping them here until the Clone Arranger decides what to do with them."

"They look familiar," Hugo mused. "Now I remember—their original was in the cinema."

"Yes, that's why we call their cottage 'The House of Seven Gables'."

The doctors entered the building, passing a locked room from which emanated a cacophony of screeches, howls, whistles, hoots . . .

"This must be where you keep the shapechangers," Hugo volunteered. He gazed in a wired window. "Fellow looks like the March Hare."

"A were-lagomorph. He only checks in for the duration of his shapechange. Hare today, gone tomorrow."

The hare was playing cards with a tall human who wore mustache,

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tuxedo, and top hat; a few feathers clung to the fabric. "Wasn't he a well-known sorcerer?"

"Now a were-duck—surely you've heard of Mandrake the Magician?"

They sauntered into the ward, passing a man who convulsively gazed first over one shoulder, then the other. "He was made paranoid by his employer, a man of strange habits who was dedicated to eradicating evil. This gentleman was valet of the Shadow."

Next Ann pointed out a dejected woman knitting an infinite scarf. "Her kids were fond of disco music; it gave her Otitis Medea, an earache so bad that she murdered her children."

A harassed-looking man sat staring anxiously into the fourth dimension. "An unfortunate case—he can see the future. The gift has precipitated acute schizophrenia."

"Dementia Precog." Hugo shrugged sympathetically, then gaped as a physician—an extremely large canine in a white coat—approached the patient. "That's a dog!"

"There's no need to get insulting," the doctor in question said.

Ann hastily entered the conversation. "Dr. Hugo Mayhem, this is our new resident Dr. Lupus, aware wolf. Shake, Lupus." Introductions over, Ann continued, "How is our precognitive doing?"

"Not well," Lupus whined. "The phenothiotimoline isn't controlling his visual hallucinations."

As if on cue, the patient cried, "Aiee! I see it! The color out of space!"

"In vain—and pharmacologically, in vein—have I attempted to convince him that those hallucinations are merely pigments of his imagination."

Ann smiled. "Well, if anyone can do it, you can, Dr. Lupus. Heal, boy." The wolf returned to his duties. "You see, Hugo, some doctors have healing hands. Lupus has the paws that refresh."

Hugo suggested, "Perhaps an effective treatment would be to reduce the precog's ability to foresee future events. It can't be eliminated totally, but it might be limited to only one day per year."

"Of course," Ann said enthusiastically. "We could make him able to see the future only on the anniversary of his birth. He'd be able to handle that—after all, most people expect birthday prescience."

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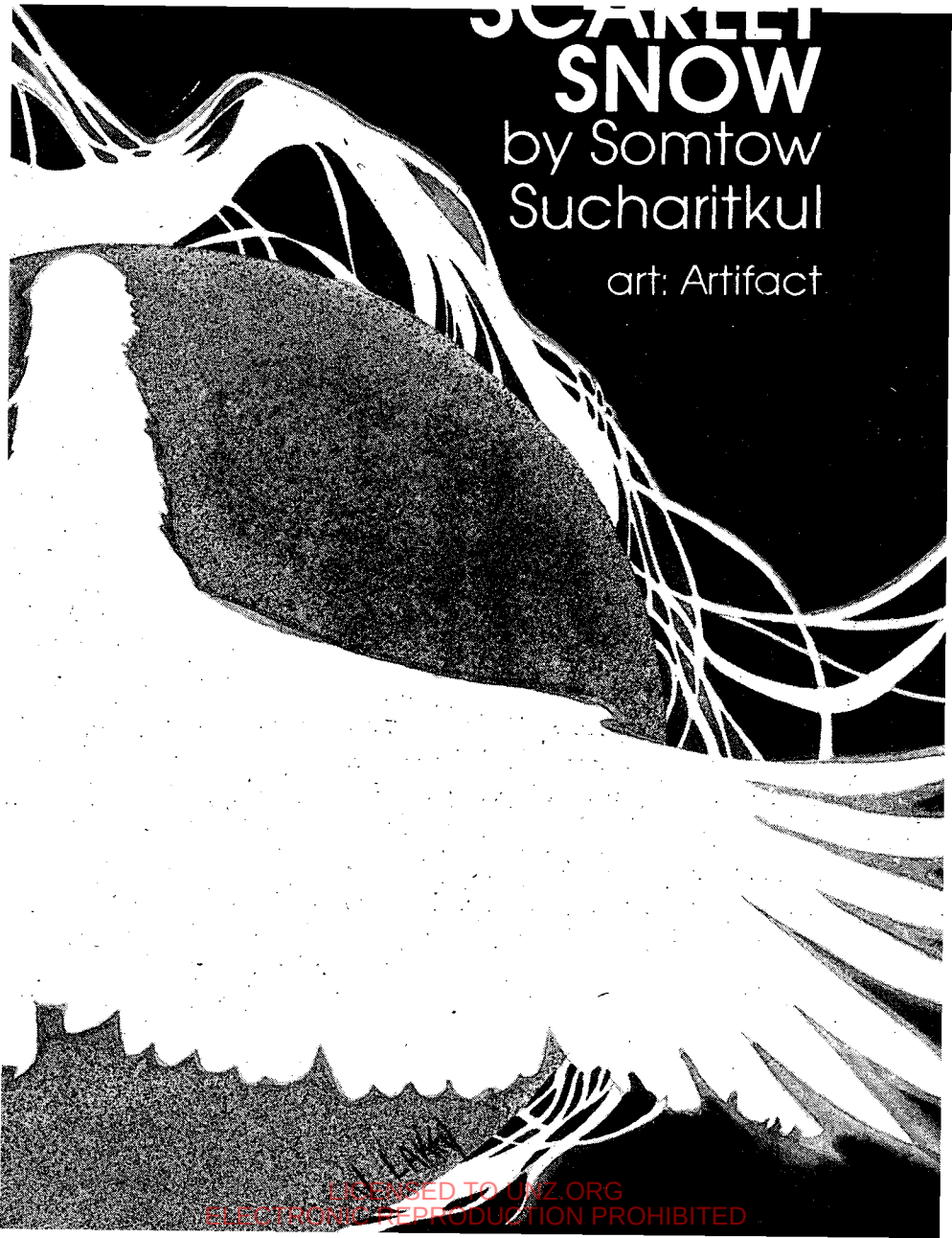

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An anecdote from the author: "I was asked to write a story in the lobby at Philcon. But after six hours' work and one unpublishable Feghoot, all I had written was the first page of this story. How strange! I have written some of my best music while being stared at in a coffee shop in Bangkok."

"They're not sleek, their eyes don't flash, their wings don't glitter with lust-driven fire the way they do in summer, phoenix-herder. What can I do? The game has come early to Kailasa. . . ."

He was startled; it was a low voice, almost an aural afterimage of the winter wind. He looked up and saw her. She was an Inquestrix; he wasn't too ignorant to notice the shimmercloak, a whirlpool of rose-streaked ultramarine, flapping and churning up the scarlet snow of Kailasa's northlands. Her face was white; her hair silk-light, milk-white; even her eyes were white as mist, and in her chin-cleft sparkled a single diamant.

He was a youth, clanless, tending flocks of firephoenixes for an absentee Kingling. Summer had been kind; his village of hovertents followed the great migration across the rift-rich Mountains of Jerrelahf, over the Pallid Ocean where they harvested the flying seaserpents' honey-eggs, down to the southlands. They had been lazy, haze-bright days when the white-scaled birds soared skyward, screeched, mated in mid-air amid bursts of blue ether flame.

Winters were hard: he drove the phoenixes, flightless, pregnant, through the northern slopes, his tunic stained a thousand crimsons by the snow. Only the bloodalgae withstood the cold the whole year round; but here the birds laid spore-puffs that would hatch, come icebreak, in blue-brilliant fireworks, and catapult their fledglings flaming into the sky. He neither liked nor disliked what he did; he'd been born to it. Sometimes, in the summers, unpredictably, the Inquestors came. Kailasa was a world set aside for a Kingling's pleasure. Here the Wars within the Dispersal of Man could not come. Nor would the war against the alien whispershadows ever touch his world.

The Inquestrix never took her eyes off him. He was disturbed. The Inquestors were like gods, incomprehensible. Some said they blew up planets for pleasure. It was hard to believe. She was too beautiful, this one, to be a world-burner. . . .

"Come," she said, "don't be afraid." He flushed. He genuflected,

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the snow-cold digging into his knees. "No, up, up, this is no ritual; we are alone here." And she reached for his sugar-pouch and began strewing the snow with the brown crystals. The phoenixes dived, hungry, and the snow flurried, white and red.

"Look at me, Arryk," she said.

"You know my name—"

"You are Arryk-without-a-clan, seventeen years old by our reckoning; you herd the firephoenixes for Ton Elloran n'Taanyel Tath, Inquestor and Kingling, Lord of Varezhdur. I've been watching you."

"Why?" Just in time, he remembered his place. ". . . Lady."

"Do not question me." She reached out; her hand brushed his cheek. The cold made him wince. "I have been watching you," she said, "waiting in my web like a spider. Does that frighten you?"

"No. It's strange, though. One doesn't talk to Inquestors." In his confusion he found himself speaking the lowspeech, as he would in the village, but she did not seem to mind.

"I am Ton Siriss k'Varad es-K'Ning," she said. "I am to inherit this world. Elloran has forfeited it in a game of *makrugh.*"

Arryk had heard of *makrugh;* it was the game that Inquestors played. When they played it, planets *fell beyond* and armies of child-soldiers stormed the skies like locusts, and refugees, packed into people bins by the millions, were shot into the overcosm to wait for the opening of a new world. *So war* has *come,* thought Arryk. *We'll all die, we clanless people.* He flicked the thought away; it made no sense.

The Inquestrix laughed. "So solemn, Rikeh!" He started when he heard her use his child-name. "This planet won't be touched; it's a pleasure world, too insignificant even to play pawn in the game. This is just a little trinket, a love-gift, because I cured him of his melancholy. Ton Elloran is very old now, boy. He has abdicated. He is giving away all his worlds: Chembrith, Eldereldad, Gom, even Kailasa, even useless Aëroësh. I know this talk is way above your head, Rikeh, but I have a whim to talk. Did you know that I desire you? Your eyes are violet like dawn over the sea on my homeworld, and my homeworld has lain waste for a century . . . I was there only yesterday. But then I stepped onto a delphinoid ship, I sailed the overcosm, I lost a hundred years in time dilation. I'm sad, Rikeh. Yes, you are beautiful, you child, you innocent. One day I will take you. Perhaps I will destroy you."

He knew she had this power. He shifted his feet in the snow, unnerved, anxious.

"I need you for something else, though, now."

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"Yes, Lady."

"The phoenixes." Her eyes burned. "I want them roused, now, in mid-winter. I want a grand hunt in the scarlet snow. Scatter the mating-pheromones in their feed. Make them think it's spring."

"They will die without giving birth, Lady Siriss, and there'll be no young, and our village will lose its livelihood. And I—"

"Don't question me! In its compassion, the Inquest will provide for you; that goes without question! But I must have my hunt." He saw her eyes catch fire when she said *hunt*. "It is a gesture, a move in *makrugh* . . . you see, Ton Elloran has decreed that he will play one final round of *makrugh* before he relinquishes his power. Don't you understand how important this is? I want to disrupt the seasons, to create a beautiful gesture of transience, to set the scene correctly for my next move. You are to be go-between from me to Elloran."

"I—" Things were moving faster than he could understand.

"You are to go to him in his palace at Varezhdur . . ." Snow whirled in a sudden bloody hurricane. When it settled, a floater hovered there, globed in a darkfield: a gilt staircase angled up from the snow, melted into the blackness. "You may take my floater."

"Yes, Lady."

"Call me Siriss. We'll play a little game, you and I, a game of false identities. Would you like that?" The boy nodded, dumbfounded. "Beware of Elloran! He is very old, very cunning, very wise in the game of *makrugh*. He is utterly evil. But we can beat him. You and I."

"I?" The phoenixes were running in circles, catching his consternation.

"Even you, pretty child. I have a mind to subvert the natural order of things, to dissolve the difference between us, to invert the seasons . . . that is how I play *makrugh*." She laughed a guileless-seeming, quicksilver laugh. "Is that not witty, Rikeh?"

"I don't know." In spite of his confusion he already found himself moving towards the stairway.

"You are tempted, you are tempted. . . ." Siriss laughed again. It was a laugh that affected menace, but Arryk felt, behind it, a curious innocence; he knew that Inquestors were often unimaginably old even when their faces seemed like children's, but somehow he could sense that Ton Siriss was not one of these ancients, that she was a half-child like himself, hiding behind the ambiguity of Inquestral agelessness. But he said nothing, for he knew that from the moment he first saw her he had been treading a tenuous tightrope, courting death with every gesture, every word.

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Anyone else from the village would have panicked and run, or thrown himself abjectly on the Inquestor's mercy. But he found himself reveling in the danger.

That, of course, was why she had picked him.

Arryk shielded his eyes: even then they smarted. The sun was rising over a sky of beaten gold. The floor was gold too, burning with reflected heat. In the center of the vast audience chamber there danced a galaxy of dust, stippling the air with dazzlesparks. When he grew used to it, the light became soft. In the distance, through the gauze of star-motes, sat a man of immense age. Nearby, from scattered sunken recesses of the chamber, music played; ethereal shimmerviols blended with whisperlyres and the voices of neutered children. Arryk couldn't speak. Ton Siriss had told him this was the serpent's lair, that Ton Elloran would entrap him with beautiful words and sights, and yet. . . .

Bolder, he walked a thousand paces toward the throne of gold. And now he saw the old man smile at him, serene, his shimmercloak swirling about his shoulders in a tempestuous artwind.

"Hokh'Ton," he murmured, prostrating himself. And then the old man laughed. Arryk looked up, his eyes tear-blurry from the brightness. It had been a soft, kind laughter.

"Get up, lad. You're from Siriss, I take it; what has she been up to then?"

"I—" Then Ton Elloran stepped down from his throne and touched him and raised him up, and Arryk saw a shrunken, sunken man, half a head shorter than himself. *His touch will sear you,* Siriss had hissed at him. *Keep down, keep low, deliver your message in a steady voice, or he will look at you, long and searchingly, and as he gazes you will crumble into dust* . . . but Elloran's touch had not burnt him. "The Lady Ton Siriss k'Varad es-K'Ning invites the Lord Inquestor to a Grand Hunt of Firephoenixes," he said, repeating the highspeech message by rote, "on the eleventh day of the week, beginning at dawn upon the Mountains of Jerrelahf and ending at dusk upon the Ruined City at the North Pole."

Elloran was silent for a moment; then he burst into helpless laughter.

"My Lord, what is so funny?" he said, then bit his tongue.

"Believe me, child, it isn't at all funny. But I am old. I've learned to laugh sometimes, for an Inquestor may not be seen to weep; that would be unseemly, you know."

"Shall I bring back a message?"

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"No. Wait." The Inquestor put his arm around the boy's shoulder and walked him down the steps, towards the galaxy of dust. Arryk was trembling now. They entered the swirling dust, and the light surged, smarted. "It's only a holosculpture," Elloran said; "my true galaxy of dust is waiting for me, in the throneroom of my delphinoid ship, for when I relinquish the Kingship of Varezhdur." Arryk was feeling more and more uncomfortable. He was thinking, But Inquestors *never* talk about themselves! They're apart from us mere humans. They live for centuries.

I'm trapped! he thought. The Inquestors were toying with him, tossing him back and forth like a ball. He put his hand through brilliant emptinesses that were clusters of dust-mote stars. "Look," Elloran said at last. They had climbed to the center of the galaxy on spider-stairs of force that twisted and branched invisibly within the holosculpture. "Here is all the Dispersal of Man." Arryk's heartbeat quickened. "Not much, is there?" the Inquestor said sadly. "The million known worlds, parsec upon parsec of the Inquest's power . . . not even half a single galaxy of dust. It humbles me, Arryk." And Arryk noticed that the old man called him not by his child-name but casually gave him status equal to himself. And this, in its own way, was more disturbing even than Siriss's unseemly familiarity. And now Elloran pointed again, and there was a string of white suns that traced a bracelet around a patch of darkness. "This," said Elloran, "is what she's after."

"Stars, Lord?"

"Not stars, but the deaths of stars. I have declared a last game of *makrugh,* and she means to win it. She doesn't know that to win is to lose. She's too new to the Inquest to understand yet. It's a symbol, you see. We call this chain of stars—because of their matched whiteness, because of their uncanny formation—the *Vauvenizhi. . . .*"

"That is Old Highspeech, Lord Inquestor?"

"Yes. It means Flight of Phoenixes."

"Oh!" He knew suddenly what it meant. "They are linked, phoenix to star. If a phoenix dies, you'll kill—millions of people!" And he cried like a little child.

The Inquestor flung the shimmercloak around them both. Stars whirled. The shimmercloak's warmth danced through his body. He heard the Inquestor's voice: "Yes. There are a thousand ways in *makrugh* of putting a world *beyond,* child. What can I do? The Dispersal of Man needs the constant vigor of change, of war and peace, of pestilence and plenty. Else it would become a stillborn, stagnant utopia peopled with the dead. But we, the Inquest, have taken away

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the evil of these things and siphoned it into our souls, and now we alone bear all the guilt . . . do you wonder then that we are unhappy, that we long for an end?"

"Can't you just end everything? Give up? Start over?" They sat down on the stairs of force, enveloped in the holosculpture.

"It is too big for a man to change, Arryk. And I, who can crush a planet with a command, am only a man. So we try to make things beautiful. We have our *makrugh,* we tag the firephoenixes and chase them through the air and bring them down; and when they die, their tags send signals through the tachyon universe to the great think-hives of Uran s'Varek, and war comes to a world of the Vauvenizhi.

"But Siriss . . . misunderstands! The game is still everything to her. She'll burn worlds out of season, she'll rain plague down on infant planets still gouge-cratered by the landings of people bins!"

"Lord, she says she will win at *makrugh,* no matter what the cost. She says that you are evil, heretical even; that you say things that go against the Inquest. But *I* think—"

"What do you think, Arryk?"

Arryk could not speak. The old man's sorrow was terrible and beautiful. And Arryk knew that he loved this man, in some strange way that he could not understand; that he would follow him as blindly as a phoenix follows its herder. Elloran did not force him to answer, but said, "Siriss has not yet learned that the object of *makrugh* is not to destroy but to heal. It is not to earn the applause of other Inquestors, but often to earn their rejection, their hatred. It is not to gain power, but to grow in compassion."

"You have to destroy her! Prevent her from playing *makrugh!*" Arryk cried.

"She must learn," said Elloran. "I accept her invitation. Will you be my messenger to her?"

Arryk did not often think of his parents. They had been killed when he was a small child, crisped and shredded by tumbling firephoenixes during a Grand Hunt. A stupid accident. There had been talk of sending the orphan to the overcosm wars to be a childsoldier and to gain a clan-name, perhaps, if he survived; but the village elders had never quite made up their minds, time had passed, they had grown used to him.

Now the firephoenixes thrust through the red snow with unwonted liveliness. Their feed had been tampered with. In a day they would burst out in flame and drag their misused bodies into the air and try to fly towards the still unwoken warmth of summer. As the

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village grew near, the tent-peaks peeping from the mountain-rifts, he remembered suddenly—

. . . soaring . . . shimmer of sunlight . . . they'd gone ahead, little Arryk in his slingwomb, to draw the phoenixes in a bow-arced line over the mountains, the Inquestors' floaters darted in the distance like haze-twisty dragonflies . . . then *duck! duck! duck!* his mother's swift sharp shriek, the angry phoenix falling, unmasking fire from the sun . . . spinning. . . .

There was the village now. Arryk consigned his birds to their forcecage, camouflaged as a bare crag jutting from the crimson, and prepared to step onto the displacement plate that led to the orphans' tent.

. . . their bodies snapping, crackling in the blue fire . . . ahead, not three meters away, the snowline ending, the scarlet cutting to seamless, endless yellow ocher veldt . . . not crying. Numbed. Sloshing home through the melting snow, thick as blood.

He grew up a moody child; for the most part they left him alone. He did his herding cheerfully enough, and was so little bother that he was easily forgotten.

Yet two Inquestors had confided in him, had told him conflicting stories, and at the bottom of their stories there was only one mutual truth: worlds would die before the Great Hunt was over. *I'm no one,* he thought, *but I alone know what it's all about.* The knowledge did not comfort him; it was cold as the snow.

Maddened, frustrated, the phoenixes were dashing themselves against the forcecage. Arryk turned aside and stepped onto the displacement plate.

She was standing in front of the tent. The village square was almost empty; two or three villagers, trapped by the Inquestrix's arrival, had frozen into genuflections and averted their eyes.

"Are you ready, pretty child?" she said.

"For what?"

"Tomorrow we chase the sunlight." She beckoned to him; he followed her onto a floater disguised by holoart to resemble a whirlpool of scarlet snow.

Inside, the walls' darkfield had been completely deopaqued, so that they seemed to be standing on emptiness, in the air over the snow.

"I told you," she said, "I would take you whenever I wanted."

"Nobody in the village wants me," he said. Not whining; mere fact.

"Shall I force you to love me? I am an Inquestrix." *But I,* he

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thought, *I own my own soul. . . .*

At a flick of Siriss's mind the darkfield settled around them and the invisible floor of the floater softened. She was like the lighthawks of summer that swooped from sunlight over flaming phoenixes, devouring him. *How she loves the role of predator!* She could not awe him because of what Elloran had said. Yet she seemed content to feed on his flesh . . .

When she was satisfied, she blinked away the darkfield and gathered her shimmercloak to her. Softly it blushed, but Siriss's paper-white features never colored, and her hair fell untousled into the perfect swirl of the artwind that kept it billowing in the stifling stillness. She showed him the crystal pendant in her hand. "It's a phoenix-tag," he said, knowing how it spelled a world's death.

"It is a semi-sentient," said the Inquestrix. "We link them with the phoenixes, life for life; when the phoenix falls, the crystal dies. It turns blood-red. Its dying shriek is a sharp shrilling through the tachyon universe; and when the thinkhives on Uran s'Varek hear of the phoenix's death, they will precipitate the linked world's death . . . thus we show that every act has its consequence, resonating down the chain of being. But . . . enough of these high affairs, pretty boy. You weren't made to understand them. Touch—" She tossed the crystal to him.

"I played *makrugh* long and hard for this pendant," she said. "Each Inquestor who takes part in the hunt has only one phoenix that he may kill, tagged with his personal tag; and almost all the tags are dormant ones that will not link to the living. They are a kind of parasite, you know. . . ."

It seemed to suck the warmth from him. It was like Siriss herself, like a vampire. "Quickly," she said, "pouch it! If it clings to your flesh for longer than a single sleep, it will be bound to you until you die!" Hastily he thrust it into his tunic.

She said, "I played *makrugh* with the Lady Ynyoldeh for three sleeps. Elloran has named Ton Ynyoldeh Queen of Daggers for this grand *makrugh*. From her I gained this concession: that my crystal would be the only living one. And that it would be linked to Kenzh, the most populous system of the Vauvenizhi. And so this gesture in the grand *makrugh* becomes mine alone, a private metaphor from me to Elloran."

"You're a monster!" he blurted out.

"Surely no," she said, teasing him almost, "how can you call me that? One world is enough to prove my point, and even that world may not die . . . it would not be compassionate to quicken all the

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crystals, to risk a thousand stars for the sake of a single gesture . . ." She sounded remote now. "I will show him that I can play *makrugh* with consummate elegance!"

"You love him. And he has hurt you." He knew this was true because, since his encounter with the old Inquestor, he had loved him, worshipped him blindly, utterly. He was all an Inquestor should be: wise, beyond deceit, compassionate. If she did not love him, she must hate him for not being able to lie to him, for not being able to shake his eerie serenity. If she could only see how her mask had slipped—

But she only smiled at him. "You pretty boy," she said. But he knew they were more alike than she would ever admit, that she was as lost as he, in her own way. They made love again; this time he could sense the child within the beast of prey. And he pitied her. He tried to hold her tight, reassuring, but she shook herself free and stood aloof. She said, "Find me the sleekest of the firephoenixes. One that will not tire, that will soar till we have chased the sun to the roof of the world. I don't want to make my kill and then have to wait all day, watching the other Inquestors and knowing that their hunting is in vain. It's your choice, Arryk. I give you the fate of the Kenzh system. You, a peasant boy, can save a star system if you choose a phoenix swift enough to elude me—and I choose to hunt the ancient way, with a bow and a single homing arrow tipped with shatterstuff. It will be beautiful, no? Like you with your clear wide violet eyes."

His hand gripped the tunic-pouch that held the death-crystal. Even through the cloth the cold stung. *In two sleeps,* he thought, *I've been thrust upward a million levels, from peasant herder to planet-savior or planet-destroyer* . . . it wasn't right! The Inquestors had their intricate game of power and control; why should they reach down and pluck him out of obscurity, and dangle dangerous truths in front of him, when in another day they would drop him, crushed, back into the snow?

I have a single chance, he thought, still clenching the crystal, *to do something important.*

He was going to save the Kenzh system somehow. It was up to him alone—hadn't the Inquestrix said so? The burden was bitter. But for a second there had been a kind of crazy joy to it.

"Go now," said Siriss. A gap opened in the darkfield; snow gusted into the floater, melted, left crimson stains on the forcefloor.

"I hasten to obey your whim." It was a mere formula of the high-speech.

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"Inquestors do not have whims, Rikeh!" For a moment she seemed strangely vulnerable. He turned his back on her and braved the cold, hugging himself so he would not be tempted to finger his new possession.

Arryk and the other herders stood in the man-tall grass that stretched all the way to the Mountains of Jerrelahf, bloody in the snow and dawnlight. Overhead, a lone lighthawk circled. The wind blew from the wrong direction. The phoenixes, primed with tampered feed, screeched against their restraints. The young boys scurried about, shushing them.

Arryk pulled his big white scarf tighter around his neck. It streamed in the ice-prickly wind. He had a secret that could kill him now, and he was afraid. At first he had thought to run out far into the snow, to bury the death-crystal, to flee and try to forget. But he knew that Siriss would still find a way to destroy the star system. He had to find a way to think like them, to understand *makrugh* a little. To create a beautiful gesture.

And if he was walking a dangerous tightrope a few days before, the day he had first seen Siriss, then now he was walking straight into the furnace. Could it really be that a woman could begin like Siriss, drunk with power and self, and after a century or two become like Elloran?

Arryk thought of a planet dying, of cities bursting into flame, he who had never been more than a few klomets from the village of hovertents. He didn't care if he died by sunfall, if only he could touch her heart.

A cry from the young herders! The sun burst bloody from the black hills! In the distance, a black-and-glitter cloudlet resolved into a hundred floaters, some darkfielded, some open and opulent, where Inquestors stood drowned in the splendor of shimmerfur and gilt. Eight orchestras of trumpets and megaconchs and lyringes and kettlecrumhorns played from hoverfields at eight corners of the sky. The floaters flitted and froze in mid-swerve like hummingbirds. Now the Inquestral assembly was overhead. Arryk saw the young ones gasp. He blinked; the colors hurt his eyes.

The music swelled, deafening. And then, slicing through the clouds, came Elloran's floater: a disk of beaten gold that seemed to shine brighter than sunlight. It tilted, and he saw Elloran, tiny, shrivelled, reclining on his throne. He thought he could see Siriss too, standing beside the throne; attendants dotted the floater.

Silence fell. Even the firephoenixes ceased to strain against their

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leashes. The tiny figure of Elloran was speaking now; ampli-jewels made his voice echo even down to the ground. Arryk felt a longing that was like pain; he knew he would never see Elloran again.

"Remember," said the voice in the sky—here it was the merest whisper, a shivering of the wind—"that only your arrow, reaching the phoenix that bears your tag, may send the message that makes your chosen planet *fall beyond.* That in our compassion we have commanded that the Lady Ynyoldeh, Queen of Daggers, cause our own tag to remain dormant, so that our joy in the chase be not dampened by bloodlust. There may be some who play the Grand Hunt for destruction; I play only as a gesture." Arryk saw that Siriss had moved away from his throne: was it in anger? He could not tell. Then he had to turn to the phoenixes.

"Rikeh, they won't fly!" a girl cried, as she loosened the jesses from her bird. "It's a terrible thing to do to them—"

The phoenixes stirred now. They'd been starved to make them airworthy out of season. At a signal from father Garavan, the chief herder, all the children let go at once. The phoenixes ran scattering into the grass, bewildered, refusing to take to the air. "More pheromones!" someone cried. Now they were pelting them with drug-pellets, and the birds were running into each other, squawking in a hideous parody of their mating cry, here and there a burst of blue flame set the grass on fire, smoke tore at his eyes—

Young children with sticks ran through the grass now, flailing at the phoenixes. A thrilling, penetrating shriek rent the air, drowned out the children's chatter. The mating call! They were all echoing it now, a single shrill note. The children began to shout the beating-song in rhythm, trampling the ground and pounding it with their sticks. A single bird half-hopped, half-soared, a streak of white breaking out of the grass-sea overhead—

The villagers were cheering now. The Hunt was beginning! First one then a dozen then a hundred phoenixes broke through the grass and sprang into the wind with the dawn-sun glinting red on their scales and their wings flapping in thundering unison. The doomed birds struggled to soar, to ignore the bitter wind that bore down on them, to breast the unwonted cold. It was a flight of terrible splendor, the last time for the village. But he knew they'd never forget, no matter what the Inquest did to them.

Now they had formed two ragged formations, male and female, the male birds holding to a cross shape and flapping their wings all at once, all together, the female phoenixes in a fluttering whorl of white already sprinkled with blue flames, and the females had begun

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to whirl toward the northern mountains with the males pursuing. In a moment the Inquestral entourages, too, had fallen into formation and were following. And the villagers, old and young, were racing for their broken-down hovercars and signaling to the village's navigator to set the tents in motion.

Arryk ran, tripped over a child, his scarf tore free . . . panicking, he roped it tightly around his neck and jumped onto the nearest hovercar. At the horizon opposite the mountains, a low dust cloud showed that the village was shifting, gearing up for flight. He was crammed in between an old woman gnawing at a jangyll bone and a squalling child who wouldn't be still. The caravan of cars sped, skimming the grass-tops, following the wheeling birds.

In a few hours the Inquestors had broken ranks, their floaters darting, weaving among the birds, thrusting through the eye of the circlet of females. No one was shooting yet. One after another the females burst into flame, the flame was quenched by the wind or the chill, the flames sparked again—

Now a single male broke loose from the males' formation, now more, now strings of males, still flapping in unison, twisted free like a yarnball's unravelling. Now the males were a net around the firehoop of the females. One after another, gaining courage, they dove into the thick of the females, seeking their pheromone-bonded mates—

And far above, Elloran's golden disk hovered, bright in the midmorning sunlight. The sky had become brilliant blue, the clouds dissolved by Inquestral cloud-sculptors, but the air was bracing as ever. Arryk sat crushed into his seat, dazzled by the splendor. He was past caring about his fate now. He was seeing the last flight of firephoenixes, and he was drunk with the splendor of it.

And now they were at the shores of the Pallid Ocean. The hovertent-village ploughed ahead, across the pastel-blue water; the hovercars were driven onto waiting rafts that were yoked to the necks of distant sea-serpents, and at a prod from the serpentman's laser-goad the water parted a quarter-klomet across the sea and the serpents rose, coiling, lashing, their scales glittering peridot, malachite, chrysocolla, emerald, jade. Hypnotized by the laser-goads' rhythm, the serpents swam crazed, hugging the surface, their flared fins spinning and fire jetting from their tails, towards the opposite shore where the Mountains of Jerrelahf still loomed, black and capped with scarlet.

Here and there, a bird fell flaming, skewered on a dart; one fell on the raft and the children fell to putting out the flames and quar-

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relling over the meat. Once the whole flock came tumbling, tired, glancing the tallest waves, and the villagers bombarded them with scent-missiles that frenzied them and dredged up the last of their strength so that they soared again, struggling against themselves.

At mid-day they reached the shore. The sun hung high but the air was chill still, and the wind blew stronger, whinnying, pelting them with snow. Quickly the rafts emptied and the serpents were freed; fins whirring, they flew southward.

Arryk saw that the phoenixes had paired off now, the males catching fire from the females as they mated in the sky. Now and then a floater spun by and a blue fireball plummeted. As they neared the mountains, more phoenixes fell, but a mass of them still flew true, arrowed up, angling toward the mountain peaks.

It was then that a single floater, totally englobed in a darkfield, came falling toward them. Nervous, the villagers stopped their cars. Some of the children whimpered. It landed softly, hardly unsettling the snow, and a voice called Arryk's name.

"Arryk of the phoenix-herders, the Lady Siriss summons you to the court of Elloran. You are to use this, a floater from the fleet of Ton Elloran n'Taanyel Tath, Kingling of this world and the principality of Varezhdur. . . ."

The others shied away from him, afraid. *Even if I survive,* he thought, *I'll never be able to go back now.* Those whom the Inquest touched were both blessed and cursed. They would always be feared, envied, distrusted.

You're truly alone now, he told himself. A few steps and he was mounting the staircase into the floater; a few moments and he had landed on the golden disk where Elloran held court, and was standing before the throne of the only man he had ever worshipped.

Elloran's face seemed impassive, like a god's, but his eyes smiled. At his feet sat Siriss, her face perfectly composed. But he sensed an unease between them.

"You've chosen your phoenix well, pretty child," said Siriss, edging her voice with scorn. "We are only a few hours from the roof of the world, and I've been unable to kill it. And I've killed a fair number!"

"Yes, my lady."

"The sensors on my arrow have been unable even to detect quite which phoenix . . . what have you done, boy? Buried it? I'll find its burial place, dig it out, and stamp on it with my foot until it sends its deathsong to Uran s'Varek!"

"I have not buried it. If I have hidden it where you cannot find it, please kill me, Lady Siriss."

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For a moment she seemed uncertain; but the look passed at once. "Come," she said, "sit by me." To Elloran she said, "Do you like my new toy? Are you jealous? Isn't he beautiful?"

Elloran said, "He is beautiful, and I fail to be jealous either of you or of him." And he smiled a quick smile that seemed to be for Arryk alone, as though they were sharing some richly comic secret.

"Enough of this!" cried Siriss, rising. "My bow and arrow!" These were brought to her just as they reached the edge of the fire-cloud of phoenixes. As she took them from the cushion, the arrow glowed an eerie green.

"At last!" she cried. "For the first time, the arrow senses the nearness of its phoenix! You see, Elloran, I was not wrong! The boy—"

"The day is not yet over," said Elloran mysteriously.

What was going on between those two? What was the *real* crux of this game of *makrugh?* He felt like a pawn again. His life was in terrible danger now, but he was no longer afraid. He felt only a kind of wary joy. It was not a feeling someone of his station should have.

Siriss ran to the edge of the hoverdisk. She aimed, her body bending taut, echoing the bow in a duo of woman and weapon, utterly graceful; and the shaft flew into the mass of blue fire. A phoenix exploded, a little nova among the fireballs. The arrow swerved, homed into her outstretched hand. She turned, acknowledging applause. He heard her say, "It is the wrong phoenix; my arrow has stopped glowing, it should not have returned. . . ."

When she approached the throne she seemed puzzled. They were crossing the mountains now, and it was late afternoon. There were far fewer Floaters buzzing about, though the phoenixes that remained, some scores of them, still flew strong. More and more of the Inquestors seemed to have abandoned the Grand Hunt and were materializing on the displacement plates in the hovering throne-room, adding to the buzz of conversation. "Everywhere around us, Arryk," said Elloran, "they are playing *makrugh.*"

Shimmercloaks everywhere. Among the Inquestors were lackeys too, and a few servocorpses serving refreshments; there were ladies with mountainous headdresses and dresses curiously wrought from cloth of precious metals or animated with dancing holosculptures of mythological scenes. Their attention was no longer on the hunt, it seemed; only Siriss and Elloran still followed the flight of the firephoenixes toward the north pole.

"If this were in season," Arryk said—he could not help sounding

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bitter—"their mating would reach its consummation at the north pole and the females would drop their millions of spores and we'd be ready for another year. . . ."

"You're sorry that this village's way of life will come to an end?"

". . . No, hokh'Ton. I don't feel anything anymore."

"Good, good. When you think you are drained of all feeling . . . it will be time for us to fill you with knowledge . . ." What did Elloran mean? Arryk sat speechless, cloaked in thought.

Siriss, coming up the steps, said, "It's glowing again!" and ran again to the edge of the disk. Each shot was as perfect as the last; each was greeted by less applause than the last. She was angry now. Coming back, she shouted, "I *will* find the tagged phoenix! I *will* destroy it!" The sun was beginning to set. The mountains were behind them. The ruined city at the north pole loomed ahead; ghostly obelisks of marble blanketed with crimson, too-symmetrical hills of red that must have once been domes . . . "They are tiring! They are going down to roost, a score or less of them! The chase is ending—bring the hoverdisk down, I'll get them on the ground!" Siriss shouted. The throneroom dove, following the birds that flamed still, blue torches in the gathering dark. At a command from Elloran a sourceless luminescence played over the throneroom. Again and again Siriss shot into the sinking birds. As they died they spattered the snow, their oxydizing blood bleaching the bloodalgae, turning the snow an unearthly white.

Now they had landed, and she and Elloran and Arryk rushed overboard to stalk the final few birds, and even the court was roused from its lethargy and began to stream down many staircases and even to leap the two meters onto the snow. "You've done well, Rikeh, but I'll win yet!" Siriss shouted, running into the whitestained snow.

And then all the birds were down. Some still flamed a little. Light from the hoverdisk shone over the court, throwing long shadows that melded into the looming towers and obelisks.

When Siriss approached Elloran, she was livid. "What have you done, you old man, you heretic? I won the deathcrystal fair, in *makrugh* with the Lady Ynyoldeh! How dare you—" She seemed about to strike him.

It was time. He stepped between them. "I don't understand anything," he cried, "but I won't let you kill a world just to score points in some arcane game—"

And Elloran roared with laughter: He moved toward the boy, gently touched his shoulder. Arryk froze, knowing the end was at hand. And Siriss looked wildly about, unable to meet Elloran's gaze.

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"You stupid girl," said Elloran—so quietly, so lovingly—"when will you ever learn why we play *makrugh?* I am many centuries older than you; through time dilation my life has spanned millennia more than yours. Yet you will not listen. . . . Three sleeps ago," he said, to the whole throng now, "this stripling Inquestrix challenged me to a game of *makrugh*. She told me that things must change now, that day must be night and summer, winter. And I said to her, 'It is true that things must change now. But not to become what they are not . . . no, they must become more what they really are.' And so I laid a challenge on her: that she should go to a village of peasants, and find an ordinary child of her own age, and even he would play *makrugh* more truly than she . . ." And then he put his arm around Arryk's shoulder and eased the scarf away from him.

Arryk's hands flew to his throat. Elloran pried them loose. All eyes turned to the jewel that clung there, embedded until death now.

Arryk wanted to cry but he didn't. He blinked away his tears. Into the appalling silence he shouted, "But you used me! You didn't care about the world you were going to destroy. I suppose you'll kill me now and your plan will be fulfilled. But at least I know that I'm better than you, even though I'm nobody and you're the highest of the high. Because I cared! And I understand how you loved Elloran, and how he saw right through you, down to the core, and you had to show him you were somehow better . . . all right, all right. I'm ready now, go ahead, kill me—"

The silence went on and on. He searched for words to pour into the silence but found nothing. *Why doesn't she just shoot me down now?* he thought. The silence stretched on for another moment—

Applause! He turned wildly to Elloran, who only laughed and hugged the boy's shoulders harder. An expression of murderous rage crossed Siriss's face, and then . . . unexpectedly . . . she merely shrugged. And then smiled a radiant smile. And at this the applause grew louder until he had to put his hands over his ears.

That night the ruined city came to life; servocorpses with torches lined the snowy streets, and the Inquestors fêted the end of the Grand Hunt, warmed with sweet zul and roasted phoenixes.

And later still, when the fires were dim, Elloran and Siriss and Arryk walked out into the snow. Arryk and Siriss walked together, speaking little. Elloran walked ahead, a tiny figure in the darkness.

"I'm sorry I used you," Siriss said.

"It's over." At these words they kissed; she was no lighthawk, circling for the kill, but a firephoenix like himself; his heart danced,

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flaming. Under a snowdrift Elloran was waiting for them.

"This will be your world now," he said to Siriss.

"Yes."

"And Arryk . . . oh, child of my heart . . . you played *makrugh* today with such elegance, such artistry. . . ."

"But you knew exactly what I had done."

"Well—I am very old." He studied the boy with piercing gray eyes. "I have reached the end of my *makrugh*. I am free—free to relinquish all the power, all the splendor. Not many of us reach the end, you know."

"Father Elloran," Siriss said, and she fell on her knees in the snow, as if she were a mere commoner, "what can I do? I would have brought war to a world I have never seen, just because I envied you your peace, your gentleness . . . can you strip me of my clan-name? How can I be an Inquestor without compassion?"

"You have already begun to find it. You knew what it was that you had to learn, but you didn't want to face it, you wanted me to get up and rub it in your face . . . if you'd really meant to win at this *makrugh,* why pick *this* boy? You didn't pick a spineless lad who would be so much fodder for your grand plan. No, you sought out a loner, an independent. You made your own plan backfire. And as for stripping you of your rank . . . how can that be? We are what we are. And you are already showing the promise of a fine Inquestor. But you must know that you will always be lonely. Do you know, boy,"—he turned to Arryk, and instinctively Arryk too knelt down in the snow—"how we pick the Inquestors?"

"No, hokh'Ton."

"Often among the dispossessed. Among the terribly alone. I was nine years old and a princeling, watching my city razed to the ground by childsoldiers."

"My Lord—" Siriss gasped. "I didn't know—"

"Yes, Sirissheh," he said softly, calling her by her child-name, "just like you." Absently he caressed the boy's neck, his finger lingering on the deathcrystal. "I had better see to it that they turn off this thing; we don't want Kenzh to go to war just because you happen to fall off a cliff." He laughed quietly. "And now . . . I have given you a planet, Sirissheh . . . what do you want, Rikeh?"

In the silence, Arryk listened to the wind. They were standing where the last phoenixes had died, and already new snow was falling, healing the deathstains with new crimson. "Listen, Rikeh," Elloran said. "Today, did you not feel many new emotions? For instance, didn't you feel a joy and pain all mingled, when you knew

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it was up to you alone to save the distant world?"

"How did you know?"

"Arryk . . . soon I will leave on a long journey. I don't know where I'm going. Away, far, out of the Dispersal of Man. They say that the Inquest is falling, Arryk. But I daresay they'll need someone to replace me. For the time being. What I mean is . . . Arryk, you have played *makrugh,* and peasants do not play *makrugh* . . . I name you to the clan of Ton. You knelt a phoenix-herder; now rise an Inquestor." He laughed, a short, half-bitter laugh.

"Are you mocking me?" cried Arryk. Were they really all alike, these Inquestors, even Ton Elloran?

"I should mock you? Oh, Arryk, never, never . . . but haven't I told you that to laugh is better than to weep? I believe that the Inquest will fall, as surely as the stars will be as dust; and what will come after the Inquest? I will be dead; but you, perhaps, will see the beginning of the fall. You may be able to guide this fall, to ensure that it does not bring utter chaos. For capricious, cruel, power-lustful as we have sometimes seemed, we have held mankind together well, Rikeh, Sirissheh. Some say that when the Inquest falls its crash will crush the universe; I wish I could show them all my galaxy of dust.

"Don't fight what has to be. I knew you to be truly of the Inquest when you put your own death before the death of an unseen world, when you welded the death-crystal to yourself as we Inquestors shoulder the burdens of the universe. You'll be one of the great ones, child, never fear."

"But—" He stood up abruptly, startled. And now the words came pouring out: "But I want to go with you! I want to follow you wherever you go, to serve you, to learn from you—"

"No. There was a time when I would have needed your love, when I would have drunk you dry. But it's Siriss who needs you."

Panic flooded Arryk. "How can I be an Inquestor? I'm just—"

"*I* became one," Elloran said, shrugging.

"But you're so wise and . . . Did you plan it all, then? Just to make Siriss understand?"

"I'm too old to make plans. Let the young ones play *makrugh.* As for today . . . a whim, nothing more."

(*Inquestors do not have whims,* Siriss had said. She seemed to remember, for she smiled wryly.)

"Wait—" There was so much more to ask. But the old Inquestor was stalking off toward the city, ignoring them completely.

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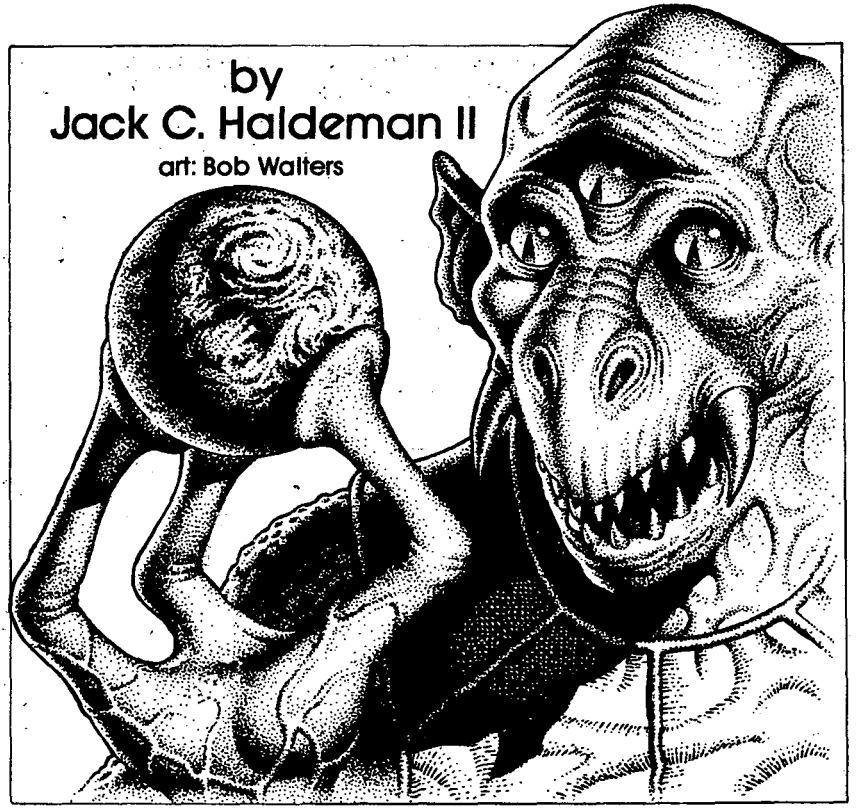

by
Jack C. Haldeman II
art: Bob Walters

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Our Mr. Haldeman reports having traded a football team for sand and sea-shells, by way of a move from a college town to the beach—all in Florida. He also reports more shark's teeth than Post Offices around his current home.

Johnny Russell was playing in his backyard when the aliens landed. He was Tarzan in a land of giant ferns while they invaded Philadelphia, but had shifted over to Superman before Baltimore

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fell. Johnny was eight years old and easily bored. By the time his mother called him in for dinner, the aliens were all over Washington, D.C. Things were a mess. Ugly green monsters were everywhere. Lots of people were real upset, especially Johnny. They were having spinach for dinner.

Johnny hated spinach more than anything else in the world, except maybe brussels sprouts and creamed corn.

He made such a fuss at the table trying to slip the dog his spinach that his parents sent him to bed early. That was too bad, because there was a lot of neat stuff on television that night. Eight years old is just the right age for appreciating a good monster or two. Johnny slept through it all, dreaming that he was flying his tree house over the ocean in search of lost continents.

His parents, on the other hand, were totally immersed in aliens of the real sort. There was no escaping them. Even the 24-hour sports network was full of monsters. Specials followed specials all night long. Bert and Sara stayed glued to the tube, afraid they might miss something. It was an exciting time to watch television, even better than the time the dam burst at Fort Mudge. A good crisis brought out the best in the electronics media, no doubt about that.

They watched the national news for a while and then switched over to the local news. They even tuned in PBS and watched a panel of distinguished professors pointing sticks at an alien's picture. It was exciting. Sara made popcorn and Bert put another six pack of beer in the fridge.

"Don't you think we ought to wake up Johnny?" asked Sara, salting the popcorn.

Bert opened another beer. "No," he said. "We've got to teach him not to play with his food. A parent has certain obligations, you know." Bert had always been the strict one.

"But isn't that a little severe?" asked Sara. "After all, he's very fond of hideous beasts."

"No," said Bert. "Remember what he did with the brussels sprouts?"

Sara turned pale. "I thought I'd never get it all out. The air conditioning hasn't worked right since."

"And the creamed corn?"

Sara shuddered at the memory of the bomb squad marching through their living room in knee-deep water. "You're right," she said, passing him the popcorn.

They settled back and watched the early news, the special news, the update news, the fast-break news, the late news, and the late-late news. In between, they watched the news in brief and the news

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in detail. They were saturated with news and popcorn and all they got out of it was indigestion and no news at all. Nobody knew much of anything about the aliens except they were crawling all over the place and were meaner than junkyard dogs.

Their silver, cigar-shaped spaceships had simply appeared out of nowhere with a shimmering colorful splash of glitter not unlike the special effects of a once-popular TV show still in reruns. It was horrible. People fled in panic, especially when the monsters started coming out of the spaceships.

The aliens stood about eight feet tall with thick, stocky bodies. Their four arms had too many elbows and not enough fingers. Folds of wrinkled green skin covered their neckless heads, and their three unblinking eyes held what could only be interpreted as malice and contempt for the entire human race.

At first it was hoped that they might be a congenial star-roving race of beings, eager as puppy dogs to give mankind all sorts of marvelous inventions. These hopes were quickly dashed. The aliens seemed far more interested in vaporizing people. Helicopters and airplanes that approached the hovering ships vanished in white-hot explosions. People who were foolish enough to make threatening gestures or stray too close went up in smoke. It made for good television footage, but did little to aid any kind of mutual understanding.

Mutual understanding, as a matter of fact, didn't seem to be the aliens' strong suit. They just didn't appear to be interested. Some of the best minds on Earth had attempted to establish communication with the aliens. Some of the best minds on Earth had been vaporized, too. The aliens were obviously intellegent, but they didn't have much to say.

Bert and Sara were about ready to turn in, having watched the instant replay of the destruction of Washington for the fourth or fifth time. It was impressive, but not really all that great. The Japanese had done it better in that movie about the radioactive frog. Sara washed the popcorn bowls.

"I'll bet Johnny will be excited when he wakes up," she said. "Channel Four said they've even seen a couple aliens right here in town. Imagine that."

"I don't think we ought to tell the boy about them," said Bert. "At least not yet."

"For goodness sakes, honey. Why not?"

"The child has an active enough imagination as it is. There's no sense in getting him all riled up. Remember the time he thought he saw that UFO down by the river?"

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Sara nearly dropped the bowl she was drying. That had been a near thing. Johnny had pulled every fire alarm in town, and only their friendship with the judge had kept their names out of the paper.

"Besides," said Bert. "What does a kid know about monsters? He's only eight years old."

Sara nodded. He was right, as always.

But Johnny wasn't completely fooled. When little Freddy Nabors didn't show up by twelve o'clock, he knew something was wrong. He and Freddy *always* messed around together on Saturday afternoon. Sometimes they went on dangerous secret missions, but usually they just played. By twelve-fifteen Johnny had decided a plague must have killed all the kids on Earth but him so he went out into the backyard to play.

He wasn't allowed to go out behind the garage, so naturally it was his favorite place. It was full of old lumber and rusty nails. Lumber was more fun to play with than almost anything. Sometimes he built boats out of the scraps, and sometimes spaceships. Today he built a Grand Prix car. It was low and sleek, faster than a bat. He pretended it was orange with black trim. Since he couldn't find any wheels, he used cinder blocks for racing tires.

Diving into the hairpin turn, he had just passed Fangio and was gaining on Andretti when he saw the monster. Johnny was not impressed. He'd seen better ones on television. Sticking his tongue out between his lips and making a rude noise, he downshifted with a raspberry and pulled to the side of the road. After taking off his imaginary helmet and racing gloves, he got out of his fabricated car and stared at the alien. The alien stared back. Three eyes to two, the alien had an edge; but Johnny never flinched. The Lone Ranger wouldn't have backed down, and neither would he.

In the distance Johnny could see one of their spaceships hovering over the river. It looked just like the one he'd seen before. He knew better than to head for the fire alarms this time, though. His father would tan his hide.

The alien grunted and pointed at his ship and then to himself. Johnny stood as firm as Wyatt Earp, his jaw set like Montgomery Clift's, playing for keeps his body held with the stern proudness of John Wayne. He didn't nod, he didn't blink. He stared at the monster with Paul Newman's baby-blue eyes, hard as ice. He wished he'd worn long pants, though. Shorts just didn't cut it when you were staring down a monster.

The alien started waving all its arms in the air, grunting like

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crazy. Johnny was frightened, but he didn't give an inch. He could have been Gary Cooper standing alone in the middle of a dusty street facing an angry mob with only the badge on his chest and the goodness in his heart to protect him. Johnny could almost hear the people scurrying for cover. The helmet and racing gloves were useless. He should have had his six-shooter.

The alien kicked at the dust, smoothing out an area between them. He bent over and Johnny hunkered down to join him. At least now he knew what to expect. They were about to talk, or *palaver,* as Slim Pickins would say.

The alien picked up a stick and drew a large circle in the dirt. From a fold in his tunic he removed a small golden globe, which he placed precisely in the center. He pointed to the sun and then to the globe. Johnny nodded, his face as deadpan as if he was trying to fill an inside straight.

The monster drew three concentric circles around the golden globe and placed another globe on the third circle. It was smaller than the first and covered with blue and white swirls. He patted the dirt, waved his arms in circles all around them and pointed to the globe. Johnny bit his lip. This was getting complicated.

The alien continued drawing circles in the dust and setting down the small globes. When he had finished, nine of them surrounded the larger yellow one. With a flourish he took one more from his tunic. This one was special; it was silver and seemed to glow with a light from within. He set it outside the farthest circle and pointed first to himself, then to the spaceship, and finally to the silver sphere.

Slowly he began rolling the sphere into the ring of circles. As he passed the outermost globe, he snarled and crushed it into the dirt beneath one of his massive thumbs. He continued rolling the silver sphere toward the center, snarling and crushing as he demolished each of the small globes. When he reached the third globe from the center, his lips drew back in a hideous sneer and he rose to his full height, towering over the crouching boy. The alien gloated, roaring with bone-chilling laughter as he crushed the small blue globe under his foot, grinding it into the dirt with a vengeance.

This, at last, was something Johnny could understand. It was a challenge. Without rising, he reached around to his back pocket. It was still there, as he knew it would be. He'd won it from Freddy Nabors two years ago and he never went anywhere without it. It was his talisman, his good luck piece. It was also his weapon and had never let him down. He gritted his teeth and took it reassuringly in his hand. It was blue with milky white bands, a perfect agate.

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He dropped and took quick aim, oblivious to the ranting and raving of the alien. He'd been under pressure before, this was nothing new. With a flick of his thumb the aggie sailed across the dust, crashing into the silver ball, sending it careening out of orbit into the yellow one. They both flew outside the circle.

He stood—as a man would stand after battle—and retrieved all the marbles. He held them high above his head.

"Keepsies," he said and slipped them into his pocket.

The alien backed away in horror, babbling wildly. With a shimmer and a pop, he disappeared. An instant later the spaceship vanished in a similar fashion, as did all the spaceships and all the aliens all over the world.

Johnny climbed back into his Grand Prix car and accelerated through the gears. He was nearly a lap behind by now and would have to do some fancy driving to catch up. Besides, his mother was fixing creamed corn tonight, and the boy who had saved the world had important things on his mind.

As he took the checkered flag he wondered how Conan would have handled creamed corn.

THE WORLD OF [ī]

To those who pronounce it "sci fi"
I *must* sadly say with a sigh:
"Please study your diction,
For in 'science fiction'
The second word has no long i."

—Bryan A. Hollerbach

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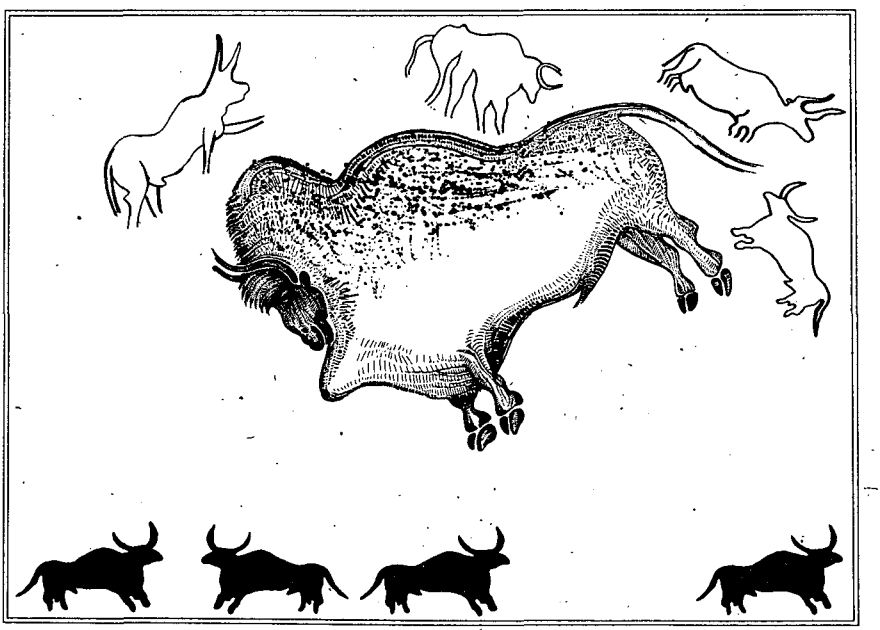
A CAPELLA BLUES

by Steven Popkes

Mr. Popkes is 29. He went to college in Missouri where—as he puts it—he stole a M.S. in physiology while the graduate department wasn't looking. He now lives in Cambridge MA and works in Boston, both of which are known to have the absolute worst drivers this side of Tokyo. He attended the Clarion SF Writer's Workshop in 1978, but didn't tell anybody until the spring of 1980, when he sold a story to *Galaxy Magazine*, which (alas!) promptly folded, so that "A Capella Blues" is his first sold-and-published story.

art: Roland Wolff



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The dim remembrance of such gorilla-like monsters, with cunning brains, shambling gait, hairy bodies, strong teeth, and possibly cannibalistic tendencies, may be the germ of the ogre in folklore.

—Sir Harry Johnston, 19th century, on Neanderthals

Singer sat outside the cave watching the stars. It was cold; patches of snow spliced the sky and ground together with strands of glowing blue. The autumn silence was total and perfect. He inhaled and sang, an enormous *basso profundo* in cadence with the whirling above and the stasis below.

Throg staggered out of the cave cursing at him. "Squat, slope-shouldered, mousebrained—Monkeyface! Must you sing in the middle of the night?"

Singer stopped singing and signed to Throg: "My name *is* Sings-by-night."

"I know that, cave painter." Throg muttered a few moments, then said, "Sing on the other side of the hill, and point your voice *away* from the cave. *I* must sleep."

Singer rose and looked up at Throg. Where he was short, squat, and powerful, Throg was tall and narrow and looked sickly. Throg's forehead lacked the graceful, flat curve of Singer's people. "As you wish, chieftain," he signed, adding the crooked finger flourish signifying sarcasm. Throg did not notice it.

Throg pinched a louse from behind his ear, cracked it with his teeth and ate it. "This painting had better be good," he called after Singer.

Singer tied his hair back with a strip of rawhide, then carefully frayed the mulberry and holly twigs into brushes. He cleaned the blowing tubes of dried pigments. Then, he sat back and watched the blank wall by the light of the oil lamp.

Throg wanted a buffalo, like the ones Singer had painted on the walls of the Hawk Clan's cave. As if he could paint those buffalo again! Here, he thought, I could take the old sand bull motif and twist it—that bulge of rock could be the head, making it actually *enter* the room.

He had already made some preliminary clay models by the time Throg's clan awoke, just before the sun rose. The wall where Singer worked was far back in the cave so that the sunlight only reached it in a warm glow. He watched the increasing light wistfully. What he could do with new-men pigments and real light! But they always

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wanted their paintings far from the cave entrance.

Enjoying the shadows from the glow, he extinguished the lamp and sat in the dimness.

Throg found him sand-painting some distance from the cave.

He approached Singer cautiously. Singer could smell his anger and fear. Probably towards him, he mused, then smiled and chuckled. Annoying Throg could become one of his major pleasures.

Throg looked at the sand painting dubiously. "I wanted a buffalo on my cave *wall*, not on the ground outside. It will get washed away."

Singer sighed and tried to explain. "This is not the painting itself, only a test of color and light."

Throg shook his head. "It should have a man in it among all those animals."

"It needs none."

Throg shrugged and squatted next to him, destroying a corner of the painting. Singer repaired it. "When will the painting be done?"

"By spring, if I have help making the pigments. Otherwise, by summer."

Throg nodded and stood. "I'll send you one of the women to help."

"No!"

Throg looked at him in surprise. The word had been spoken.

Singer signed hesitantly. "Your women distract me, being always available and in season."

"What do you mean?"

Singer forced himself to relax. The thought of having to work with one of Throg's women had startled him. The women of his own people came into season only a few times a year. The rest of the time they were good companions and friends. These new women were *always* ready. Many of his tribesmen had lost themselves in a riot of sex, leaving behind abandoned women and a stream of half-breed children. Whole clans were lost sometimes in this manner.

"Consider it a taboo of my people's gods," Singer finally signed. Throg would believe anything if it had gods in it.

Throg looked at him desperately. "I can't send a *man* to help you. Not a hunter!"

"As you will. Summer, then."

Throg scowled and returned to the cave.

The next day Throg was waiting for Singer when he returned to the cave from his morning bath. With him was a small boy, broader and stronger than the other children and with a sloping forehead.

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Singer stopped as he recognized the features of a half-breed child. Automatically, he made the seventh sign of pity and sorrow to him. The child, of course, did not understand. He stopped and bowed slightly in the child's direction. "What do you want?" he signed to Throg.

"This is Zee. He is old enough to know the secrets of pigment making. I hope *he* will not offend you." Throg laughed.

Singer ignored the laugh. "He will not." He crouched to the child. "Do you know sign?" He moved his hands slowly and carefully.

Zee looked up at Throg quickly, then nodded.

Singer straightened. "He will help me. How did he come to be *here?*" He added the dropped hand, indicating a disgusting area nearby. Throg missed it but Zee laughed.

"One of my hunters took as a second wife one of your people nine seasons ago. She died last winter. He survived, though he is ugly." Throg shrugged.

Singer made a gesture of agreement suitable towards either an infant or a moron. The child laughed again. "I go then to work," he signed to Throg. To the child he signed: "Mix me the red pigment, the color like that of a marmot's fur and meet me in the cave." Zee did not understand immediately. Singer mimed a marmot; and Zee smiled, then left at a run.

He found in Zee a remarkable companion, unlike the previous times he had painted for the new men. A helper was necessary, for the new men were far better able to sense the proportions and measurements necessary to the art of pigment-making. Also, Zee was fully conversant in handtalk. Singer did not have to use with him a kind of crippled pidgin as he had to do with Throg. Zee could not sing, but he could sit and listen to singing, something Singer had only seen among his own people. True, Zee was clumsy, both in daily life and in his attempts to help Singer paint. Even in this, however, he was more graceful than Throg's clan. He lived in a middle world, able to design and make the new men's pigments and tools, but still retaining some of the qualities Singer prized in his own people.

Fall had gone and winter proper come to the land before Singer was satisfied with his studies for the painting. Now, he knew what image was to be on the wall. It only remained to find the spirit, the essence of the image. For weeks, he sat by lamplight watching the stone wall, waiting for the activity of preparation to die down in him so that he could hear the music of inspiration. Zee waited with him, talking and asking questions. It was obvious to Singer that the

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miracle of *process* was lost to him.

Throg came and watched and grunted a question whether there would be men in the painting this time, then left. It was obvious he was lost to any miracle at all.

He could hear Zee crying out long before he reached Singer.

"Singer! Another, shorter man!"

He caught Zee and held him still. "Another shorter man? What do you mean? Like unto myself?"

Zee nodded. "He has just come in with a kill and asked Throg for a place to sleep the night."

Singer saw him by fading sunlight, old and thin but still broader in the chest than two of the new men together. He laughed out loud when he saw Singer.

"A painter! Will you not sponsor me to this barbarian? He protests no room, though I can tell by his stance he lies."

Throg did not see the exchange and still was trying to explain that this was a *small* cave, big enough only for himself, his few hunters, and some women. Singer laughed also. It was plain to him that Throg was interested only in keeping his women to himself. One halfbreed, his body stance and set of mouth said, was enough.

"Sign to him you are a eunuch and he will agree readily enough."

The stranger did so and Throg reluctantly agreed to let him spend the night. The stranger brought a haunch of bison nearly as big as he from the darkness and lay it in the snow near the entrance. Singer saw Throg wear a look of cool disdain masked over jealousy as the rest of the clan made noises of astonishment over the size of the kill.

"Weaklings!" signed the stranger to Singer, "to be so impressed by one slab of meat."

"They have their uses. What is your name?"

"I am called Walks-through-the-snow-barefoot-to-remain-quiet." Walker looked about the refuse in the cave. "Do they have no sense of cleanliness, either?"

Singer smiled and led Walker back from the cave entrance to where he was working.

"What is your commission?" asked Walker.

"The chieftain here saw some of my minimal work in the cave of the Hawk Clan, east of here. He wishes a similar buffalo."

Walker looked at him with new respect. "You are the buffalo painter? I had thought you older and bowed with experience. I have not seen them myself, but another who has told me they were as

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sand paintings and ice carvings upon the walls."

Singer made a sign of embarrassed aversion. "He was surely talking of another."

Walker shook his head and smiled. Singer showed him the clay studies and Walker commented on them and made a few suggestions.

Zee came in hesitantly and sat next to Singer. Walker stopped signing and, seeing Zee's appearance, made a motion of sorrow and sympathy. Zee bowed to him.

"There are more such each year," signed Walker, "and less true men."

"We shall live through this. We survived worse when the ice came."

Walker shook his head. "I do not think so. We are losing more than life. We are losing our soul."

Singer reached an arm around Zee and held him close. "This may be, but there is some hope in these offspring from us and them."

"This is truth?"

Singer told him of Zee's abilities.

Walker nodded. "It may be as you say. I have heard also of a land to the east surrounded by water, where our kind dwell in great numbers. It had been in my mind to go there."

Singer made a sign of disbelief. Walker looked amused. "I do not believe it either, yet it pleases me to think about going."

They signed into the night and fell asleep next to Singer's clay figures. In the morning, Singer rose and found Walker dead.

Throg was horrified. "An evil ghost to haunt my painting! To haunt my *cave!*"

As he ranted thus, Singer carried Walker gently out of the cave into the daylight. It was too cold to bury him properly, laid out with all of his tools as symbols of his life. He brought Walker farther to a cliff nearby that stood overhanging a lake. There he threw down a large rock and broke through the ice. He tied another rock to Walker's body, lifted him sadly and slowly, and cast him down, calling after him. They had not sung together that night as Singer had hoped they would. Singer sang now, fully and openly, a grief-born song of the lake and the woods and the wind. It seemed as if Walker sang with him.

Another of us has gone and not been replaced.

Throg surprised him by insisting that Singer continue with the painting. Singer was glad. The inspiration was in him now, born of Walker's death. Zee helped him block out the space of the painting.

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He carefully drew with a smoldering twig the outline and threads of the muscles. These would be removed before the painting was done and served as a guide only.

The winter storms howled and raged outside as he meticulously applied Zee's pigments to the stone. The lamplight gave them a rose color, and he countered this by using more charcoal dust on the brushes. Around the central bull were smaller bulls, barely there, ephemeral ghosts of the idea of bulls. The old one himself was painted with his head on an outcropping of rock, so that he looked as if he had just been arrested in the act of turning to gaze into the cave. His eyes were heavy with wisdom.

The winter was hard on Singer. The ready women were closer to him and he found himself distracted. Throg had already made crude signs to him that he considered his women as part of Singer's payment. It was a payment Singer did not really want. Still, his body betrayed him at times and woke him with lusty dreams.

The time was near daybreak. The season was very early spring.

He stared at the wall, unconscious of any noise or movement beyond it. There, staring back at him, stood an old buffalo. Old dreams of youth surrounded it, ancient visions of glory. It watched him with Walker's eyes.

He walked quietly to the front of the cave and sat before the fire. Around him he felt, but did not take part in, the movement and bustle of living: the thin scraping sound of hide preparation, the smell of Throg's women, the tracery of the fire's shadows.

Throg looked across the fire to him. Singer nodded.

The chieftain whooped and stood. "It is done. The painting is finished."

Around him erupted a geyser of laughter and motion. Throg dragged him back to the painting and a hush fell upon the clan.

Throg watched it for a long time. Singer leaned against the cave wall, tired, spent, uninterested in their opinion.

Throg cleared his throat. "Why is there no man in it?"

Singer closed his eyes and sent up an entreaty to the gods, if gods there were, that such stupidity be allowed to live. "It needs none," he signed.

Throg nodded. "It is good. You have done well."

Singer agreed.

The party lasted until dawn and afterwards. Throg insisted the acting out of hunts and brave deeds be done. Singer watched their clumsy attempts to act out a wolf or a ram and remembered the

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brilliant illusions he had seen in his own tribes, without costume or props, only their own bodies. Throg's clan beat on drums and chanted with reed pipe accompaniment. He remembered the singing, alone or only with each other, of his people. He drank their mixture of blood and sap and grew drunk, became violently sick, and passed out.

It was quiet when he awoke.

He sat up suddenly and was sick at once. Around him there was massive evidence he had been sick in his sleep. He stumbled out into the snow and rolled in it, washing off the vomit and filth of the cave and bringing himself stingingly awake.

He returned and walked back to the painting.

There was a glow of lamplight there.

Throg stood before it, working near the head with one of Singer's brushes.

Singer stood frozen still, a shock penetrating through his heart and viscera. A thought: *have they no understanding at all?*

He roared and in the same instant struck at Throg. Throg tried to move away but was too slow and the blow struck him at the shoulder. He was thrown against the wall of the cave, his side hitting an outcropping of rock.

The rest of the clan surrounded Singer and prevented him from reaching Throg. He looked at the painting. Near the head of the buffalo, Throg had drawn the stick figure of a man obviously dead or injured, with an erection.

Throg limped over to him, holding his side. "It is *my* painting now. I say it must have a man."

"Fool!" signed Singer, "Offal! Dung! I spit on your clan. I spit on your whole foul race. You are weak so you invent tools. You are slow so you make weapons. You cannot mime so you use costumes. You cannot stand cold so you bundle up in skins. Things you cannot do you must undo. Half-men! You cannot even sing! You are not worth the least of my tribe."

They beat him with clubs and he broke two or three of them before he was brought down. They shoved him roughly across the floor and threw him from the cave mouth into a drift of snow.

He carefully mouthed their ugly-sounding words back at them. "You are dead inside. Dead!"

He crawled from the snowdrift and brushed the flakes from him. It was cold and his wounds hurt, but he ignored both. He staggered across a hill, wanting to be at least out of sight from them. There,

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he sat on an exposed boulder and shook his head, waiting for it to clear.

"Singer?"

He whirled to the voice. It was Zee, holding a bundle of his things.

"I brought these to you. Throg was going to throw them out." The boy looked up at him. "Are you all right?"

Singer nodded. "What will he do to you? You are associated with me."

The child shrugged. Singer corrected himself. This last winter Zee had put on muscle and bone. He had grown. He was nearly a man.

"Where will you go?" Zee asked.

Singer did not know himself.

"I think I shall go east, after the land Walker spoke of." He dressed himself with a light skin shawl and bound his feet against the ice.

"This is too quick," said Zee.

"It is always thus. The world moves too fast for those on it."

"Take me with you!" Zee cried. "I want to . . . see sunrises and birds flying and be alive as you are."

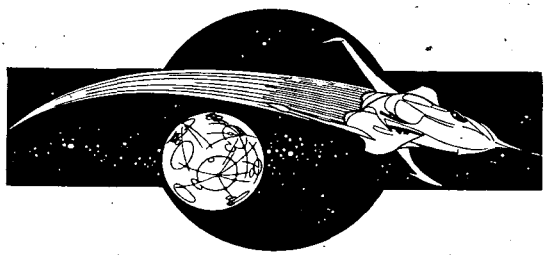
He held the boy a long time, close and warm. When Zee ceased to weep he released him. "You must go back. You are my hope."

"Hope?"

"Go back. Breed with them. Make them learn. Bring them to life. Paint for them. Make clay figures. Teach them to move gracefully. If you cannot teach them, teach your children. Go." He waved him back. "Go," he signed to Zee. Zee disappeared over the hill.

Singer shouldered the skin bag of his possessions. He was sick, hurt, and brutally tired. He would not think of that now. He walked to the east, though he did not believe in Walker's mythical land. There was no place free of these new men. They were supplanting his tribe, stealing his earth. He felt inside a quiet despair.

The song of his mourning moved toward the sunrise.



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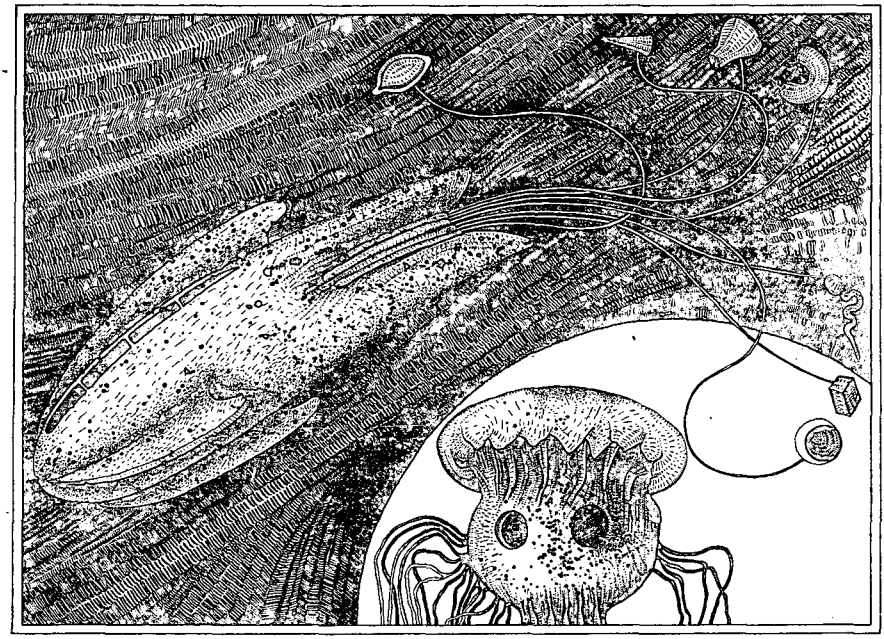
by Bradley Strickland



art: Roland Wolff

The author is a native of Georgia, where he lives with wife and children, teaches, and—increasingly—writes. His work has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine;* this is his first SF sale.

Mortally ill though he was, Lynak, Prime Elder of Hara Gatherings, lifted himself from his bed of cushions and forced his eight knees to extend. The effort cost him great pain, and he panted for breath, but at last he stood in the high stance of command. He would

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not sprawl as though in surrender to meet the alien.

But despair lashed Lynak like a whip across his carapace as the thing entered his room in the Den of Healing. It appeared frail, or would have if horizontal, with loose, puckered silver body-skin scored by what looked like metal-stitched scars; but it towered on just two limbs, its huge, bulbous head stooped below the red sandstone ceiling. Even in full health, even stretched to his utmost, Lynak could never best the height of this creature.

The being seemed to sense some rudiments of civilized behavior, for it quickly sank into an appallingly alien cross-legged posture, its head bowed close to the transparent quarantine-membrane that bisected the room. "The guards sent me in." It spoke in a pleasant echoing sing-song. "Elder, I give you greetings."

Lynak sank into a more bearable posture. He gasped, "You are not one of us. How comes it that you speak our tongue?"

"I only appear to, Elder. My ship has listened to Thann voices for months, from far above Rictar, and it has learned your speech. A device on my ship changes your language to mine, and mine to yours. A second device allowing me to speak and to understand is made into my—covering."

Lynak wheezed, "A ship travels on water. My guards told me an insane tale of your vehicle's having descended from the sky to an empty meadow forty *quarik* to the east. We thought it some incredible attack from the Western Gatherings—but you are obviously no Thann, and your words lack meaning. What did you come in? A ship, over water, or a thing from the sky?"

"I come from beyond your sky, O Elder; and yet I call my vehicle a ship. Some of our words lack exact counterparts, but we should understand each other well enough, if we both show goodwill. For my part, O Elder, I offer wishes: for you, long life; for your people, full bellies and victory over enemies."

Lynak growled, "Vain wishes! This Den of Healing is the dwelling-place of my death, and my people face more fearsome enemies than a *twil* faces *azaks*. What are you? Why do you trouble us?"

The creature spread its mandibles, revealing two even rows of some white substance. "I am a peddler, a meddler, a teller, and a seller," it sang. "Riches from the stars I bring, wonders from the sky I fling. My bargains are better than avarice can dream; and wealth, when I sing, is always by theme."

"Hatchling nonsense!" cried Lynak, but a great blinding pain grabbed him from behind and threw him to his knees. It snatched the very breath from his body. When at last it released him, Lynak wheezed and bubbled and retched at the stench of his own disso-

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lution. When he could speak again, Lynak gasped, "You can sell us nothing, nothing at all. See, even now *Gora* gapes her jaws for me, and when I am in her belly, the belly of death, my people also shall die. They were the Hara, the great ones; but with my illness they grow more foolish and weak every day. Once I led them by my strength, but now I die and they scatter. Soon the evil Thann of the South and West will try us, find us weak, and devour us; it is an old tale with the Thann. The Hara will be no more, unless—" With great effort, Lynak forced his eyes to focus on the still figure beyond the quarantine membrane. "—unless you bring us weapons."

The space-peddler bobbed its great head from side to side. "That is never my way. I have no weapons, O Elder. I use none myself, nor have I any to offer in trade. Let others sell death, my Elder. I deal in life."

"Life. *That* you cannot sell me," Lynak said bitterly.

The being was silent for a moment. Then, very quietly, it said, "My name is *Garet*."

At first Lynak thought the hot wash of feeling was a final throe of agony, but he heard the clicking of his own pincers, like a *kasta* shell in a pummelling rain, and realized that he was merely confused and, yes, acutely embarrassed. Softly the Elder murmured, "You are a stranger and cannot know our ways. With us the giving of names is a most sacred—"

"I have heard your broadcasts, and I know the custom," the trader said patiently. "I would be your good friend. My name is *Garet*."

After a moment's hesitation, Lynak muttered, "What harm can it do? I am dying, anyway, and no one will believe you if you tell this. My name is Lynak. I have not strength for the bonding dance."

"I could not do the dance. But, Lynak, I honor your friendship, and I shall bear your name in my mind as a precious token. Now tell me: what may I sell the Thann of Hara Gatherings?"

Weariness came and sat heavily on Lynak's carapace. "Nothing. Nothing. Nothing."

"Come," cried Garet, with spirit. "After all, only a fool says 'no' before tasting the *taress*."

Despite his illness, Lynak chittered at the familiar Hara proverb, the punch-line to an ancient, vulgar joke. The movement brought on a convulsion.

Garet leaped to his feet, banging his head against the ceiling. "My Elder, you are distressed. What is your ailment?"

Resting on his belly, Lynak gasped, "My people call it the dark corruption."

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"Yes," said Garet. "This, too, I know from your broadcasts. I have made my ship reach into your air to find the virus that causes the disease, and my laboratory has altered it. This corruption is the most dreaded of all Thann illnesses, is it not?"

"Well it should be." Lynak's tone was bleak. "It eats and dissolves from within. It is a curse fatal to all Thann who contract it. You can sell me no nostrum to ease its pain, for none exists."

Shockingly, the creature on the other side of the membrane tore open its thorax—no, Lynak saw, rather it opened a compartment in a sort of artificial skin it wore—and produced a short, gray, rod-like affair. Garet spun and capered in a most extraordinary manner, chanting, "Say not so before you're sure! Possibly I'll sell a cure!"

Then he ripped away the protective membrane.

"Fool!" choked Lynak. "You've killed every Thann in the building, and yourself!"

"No." The peddler loomed over him. "I am not of this world, and the disease has no hold on me."

"It holds my people in a death-grip! You cannot know how rapidly the corruption spreads—what are you doing? Back!" For the being was trying to touch him with its rod.

Lynak struggled back himself, scrabbling with all eight legs, too short of breath to call for help. The wall stopped him. Garet leaned over him, touched him hard on the brain-hump with something that burned like fire. The room wavered and dissolved; Lynak saw the black mouth of Gora, the death-mother, yawning to swallow him; and in he tumbled, whirling down the cold dark throat, fading from the world in fear and outrage. . . .

The cure was miraculous.

Lynak regained consciousness by nightfall, was on his feet the next day, and by the end of the week was once more hailed as greatest leader of Hara Gatherings.

So Garet made his first sale on Rictar: the anti-corruption medication, or, more accurately, the complex directions for its preparation, went to the Thann healers for the merest pittance, for a few cartloads of sand from the banks of the green river. It was a most unusual sale; the haggling went in reverse.

Finally Risak, the Prime Healer, completely lost his temper and railed at the trader: "Fool! Imbecile! This drug is salvation for us. Soon we can make every Thann in Hara Gatherings immune to the dark corruption. For releasing us from the curse of centuries, what payment do you ask? *Sand?* If this is not mockery, it must be some

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alien trick!"

But Garet turned him away with a wink and his usual twinkling nonsense: "The scourge of Thann since time began fills no other worlds with fear. Yet who knows? Some loathsome, still more deadly ill may be cured by sand from here."

Risak continued to protest and finally grumbled his way to Lynak, but the Elder merely dismissed his misgivings with a philosophical, "Oh, well. We cannot force payment on the trader. And what can one expect of a being who carries his brain in his head, Risak? His ways are not our ways."

The discussion with Risak did plant one idea in Lynak's mind: with all of the Hara Gatherings safely inoculated, perhaps Garet had unwittingly violated one of his principles. Privately, Lynak conferred with his generals. They were intrigued by his notion of transforming the dark corruption into a weapon of war, to strike down the Thann colonies of the South and West. But in the end, Lynak counseled them all to consider and wait. "Say nothing of this to the trader," he ordered. "His kind has an aversion to war, and does not believe in weapons. I would not violate his ethics."

Weapons, Garet did not sell; but other goods he dispensed plentifully: to farmers he sold seeds, for instance, that had originated on far, unknown worlds, but which, with genetic alterations, sprouted here on Rictar to produce tantalizingly tasty and nourishing crops. To help the seeds spread, Garet even threw in for free little flying things, tiny living creatures which themselves produced a flavorsome liquid. They, even more than the plants, excited the wonder of the Thann, for in the heavy gravity of Rictar they had never before seen creatures fly, had never even dreamed of flight. Now their thoughts took to the skies on the humming wings of *beez*.

And again the bargain was a strange one: the seeds went for almost nothing, for tanks of water or clumps of native plants or even clods of dirt.

To the machinists of Hara Gatherings, Garet sold a new type of engine, one that was much more powerful than any the Thann had built, and much more efficient in its use of fossil fuels. In exchange for that he would accept only a record-scroll listing the generations of the Thann Gatherings, with all their ancient hatreds and wars.

To other Thann he sold plans for constructing a machine that could trap the dense air of Rictar with two outstretched planes and, with the assistance of the new engine, actually lift itself to soar above the ground. For this flier Garet accepted a child's toy, a model of a Thann ground vehicle.

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So it went, for many weeks. Garet sold many things to Thann old and young, sometimes something large, sometimes something small, often only an idea; but what he sold always amazed and delighted the purchaser. And always in payment Garet took only things of little or no worth to the Thann: a handful of sparkling dust, a few squares of shiny metal. At last Garet began to look to the sky and to speak of leaving Hara Gatherings for other markets.

At that time Lynak came to him. It was late afternoon; Garet reclined at his ease on the meadow near his ship. Lynak, in testimony of their friendship, came and lay down close by. "Garet, friend," he said in greeting.

"Lynak, Elder, good friend. Welcome."

"What strange thing do you do now?"

"I am watching the sunset, Elder, and thinking thoughts of beauty."

Lynak gazed westward. Over the low domes of Hara Gatherings the bloated red globe of *Barathaz,* life-giver, hung almost touching the horizon. Above it layers of pink, red, and orange stacked themselves one upon the other. Lynak felt strangely moved, for he, too, saw a kind of loveliness there; and, as far as he knew, no Thann had ever before looked to the sky for beauty. "I still do not understand you, friend. You enrich the Hara beyond all dreaming, and yet you take nothing in payment."

"But I have been paid." Garet made the smile-gesture he used so often. "I have water, dust, plants, animals, air, sunlight. Who would demand more?"

The ground beneath the tradeship had been scorched in the landing. Even now the usually dense green carpet-plant had not reestablished itself. Lynak scraped aside a charred clump of it and thrust a pincer into the soil. He held up a clod, crushed it to glittering dust, and let it cascade down. "Is this stuff precious to your people?"

Garet lay back with his arms behind his head, and his laughter was soft as the spicy scent of the soil. "A stranger from the sky could easily lie," he sang. "Yet I will not. No, Lynak, such things as your people bring me are of almost no value to myself or my kind. But who can predict what they may mean to other beings, or what wonderful things my ship might be able to make of them? Listen: I know a cold world where the fireworms you despise as pests would sell for a hundred *sada* each. On a desert planet one of your lowly *darz,* one of your water-plants, would be treasure unimaginable. This dust that you dig might be transmuted by my ship into a gem for which some great ruler would barter half his planet. I live on investments,

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Elder. Always, in the end, I collect a satisfactory payment."

Lynak said sententiously, "One who loves risks loves Gora."

"Ah, but Garet does not love Gora, Elder. Garet loves only life."

In the western sky Barathaz slipped lower and lower. When only a red sliver showed above the horizon, Lynak said, "You are, I suppose, still determined to leave us."

"Soon, Elder. I have other markets to visit, other bargains to strike."

The sun vanished. When a few stars twinkled in the purpling sky, Lynak spoke again: "Is what you once told me still your mind? You will sell to the other Thann Gatherings nothing that you have sold to us?"

"That is still my mind, friend Lynak. Bargains are more precious when they are unique. Besides, you may wish to turn trader yourself one day. I imagine that the cure for the dark corruption would bring a worthwhile price anywhere on Rictar, for instance. It could make you rich and powerful."

"Yes," mused Lynak. "Powerful, indeed." After a moment, Lynak said, "You once promised to speak of your own world."

"So I did. What would you know of it?"

"Where is it, and what is it called?"

In the dusk, Garet lifted one arm to point to a spot low over the western horizon, to the south of the sunset afterglow. "It is called *Urth*. It would lie there, a little to the left of the blue star you call Tiraz. If you could see my sun, it would itself look like a very dim star, though from closer in it is brighter and yellower than your own Barathaz."

"If this sun is not even a star in our sky, it must be distant indeed."

"It is," sighed Garet. "So distant that, if the light could even reach this far, it would take more than a hundred of your years to make the journey."

"But your ship can travel faster than that?"

"In a manner of speaking. It is hard to put into your words, but the *Terraquest* has a mechanism that allows it to forget that space exists. No, do not ask, Elder," said Garet, laughing. "That device is not for sale. I wish to feel no pincers on my tail!"

Lynak chittered politely. "I would not seek to purchase the device, friend Garet. Rictar is world enough for me. But tell me of *Urth*."

"I have been away for a long time, Elder, but I remember it as a place of wonders. Really, though, it is very like Rictar. Our world has the same sort of air as yours, the same types of oceans and continents, though *Urth* has rather more water than Rictar, and

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rather less land. Let me think: we have mountains much higher than yours, and deserts much drier than any you will see here. There are places so cold that the moisture in the air becomes solid and falls from the sky in flakes like *anwa* scales, just as small and just as white. Our world is a bit smaller than yours; a bit cooler; and much, much more crowded. How many Thann live on Rictar?"

Lynak touched his pincers to his carapace in a humorous gesture of bewilderment. "*Kel,* I do not know. Millions of us, I suppose, counting the gatherings on all three continents. Who can tally the Thann?"

"My ship can tally them, O Elder," said Garet, slapping his own sides in friendly imitation of Lynak's movements. "And it did so before I landed. I can tell you that in all Rictar there are seven hundred million Thann, give or take an odd gathering. So you can hardly comprehend when I tell you that on *Urth* and two sister worlds there live nearly forty billion of my kind. Believe this, O Elder: on *Urth* I could never rest in an open meadow like this to admire the sunset and the stars, to feel the cool breeze of evening on my face; for on my world we have no meadows anymore, only hive on hive of people. Most of us never step outside, but when we do we cannot see the sun or stars because the air is opaque with mists and vapors of our own making, and our skies are hidden."

Lynak wrestled with the image. "That many beings, that close, and yet you fight no wars? It is hard for me to see this in my mind—the Thann Gatherings lie far apart, yet each wages war on every other. Do your people like living in this crowded manner?"

"Some do, some don't. Some will, some won't. And some," laughed Garet, "turn traders and rove through space, seeking for a marketplace."

Lynak considered the stars. "Friend Garet, I begin to understand. This, too, this sharing of thought, this watching of a sunset, is a form of payment. You find here what your own world cannot offer you—"

Garet leaped to his feet. "The night-chill is coming. I must lock up, friend Lynak. And tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, O Elder, I must leave for new territories."

Lynak said, "Go in prosperity, trader. Still, I wish the Thann of Hara Gatherings could offer better payment for the gifts you have brought us."

Garet sprang into the air—a trick that could not fail to amuse any Thann—and clicked his heels. "Who knows? You may yet find a way. I promise to return one day."

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"Those who have given names take their promises seriously, Garet. I hold you to that one."

When Garet spoke, his voice conveyed conviction: "Elder, I swear to return. And I swear, too, the other—I will sell no goods to the other gatherings of Thann that I have sold to your people. There is no need, for my ship carries variety enough for all."

Lynak slowly placed his head on the ground, a gesture of intimacy. "Friend Garet, I would trust you with more than my life. I value your friendship more than that of any of my people. Go and return, trader of *Urth*! And take this wish from an Elder: May I be living when you come back to us, and may I lead the Hara then, for I believe that by that time I will be in a position to repay you as we think you deserve."

Garet bowed in the darkness. His voice came oddly gruff and muffled: "You have become my good friend, Lynak of the Hara. For you, this wish: May you discover the true value of the goods you have bought, and may you lead your people to use them with wisdom!"

Lynak watched Garet stride away, into the tradeship. Then the Elder walked back across the meadow to his own waiting groundcar. The driver did not speak to him. They returned to Hara Gatherings, where through the rest of the night and into the following morning Lynak closeted himself with four of his generals. The military had worked out a simple proposal to combine the flier and the corruption virus in a way that would sow grim death among the hated Thann to the south and west.

The Hara once had a saying: "Never trust a peddler's word, for he will sell you *graxilt* and call it *braxas*." In this case the saying was untrue, for Garet kept his word to Lynak. He spent over two years on Rictar and visited a hundred and six gatherings of Thann in all; and each time he sold only new things, unique things: sources of power, devices of comfort, new plants, new animals, new ideas. Never again did Garet find a friend as close as Lynak, but everywhere he left satisfied customers. And somehow in each gathering a few Thann began to comprehend that if they combined certain of their purchases in certain ways, the result could be very good for them and very bad for the evil Thann in the enemy colonies to the north, to the south, to the east, to the west. . . .

Finally came a day when Garet made one last bargain and left the planet for other worlds, to sell other wares. As he left, Garet looked back on Rictar and thought of the many times he had made

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the same two promises—not to sell identical goods to any two gatherings of Thann, and to return one day, perhaps to accept a more princely payment for the things he had sold.

Once he left Rictar behind him, he traveled far and by circuitous ways. Oh, he was a trader, was Garet of Earth! Devious he was at times, cunning at others; but always in his own fashion Garet was a man of honor; and he never broke a promise. He had visited sixteen other inhabited worlds and had by his own count spent more than twenty years in trading before his ship once again shone red in the light of Barathaz. The years had brought perils and had taken tolls; but Garet still looked much the same, for the people of Earth lived long, long lives.

His old skills easily brought the *Terraquest* into low orbit around Rictar. Garet's viewscreens showed him a well-remembered world: the russet and green spread of continents, the turquoise and blue shimmer of ocean, the white sweep and swirl of cloud. Garet held the ship in orbit for some time, with communication devices working and with certain detection sensors aimed at the planet. But all the speakers hummed placidly to themselves, with no Thann word spoken to greet him; and all the counters locked their indicators on zero.

Garet found no need, this time, to land the ship in a deserted meadow. He brought it down in the center of Hara Gatherings and stepped out into a wasted city, a charnel-house of Thann. Dens lay open like crushed skulls. Some, nearly melted to oblivion, reminded Garet that he had sold a stellar amplifier to the Thann colony to the west. Whatever war had obliterated the Hara had blazed briefly years before, for the corpses that lay in the dens and in the streets had weathered to transparent, chitinous exoskeletons, so fragile that they flaked, scattering to dust and ruin at a touch. Earth weeds sprouted in the broken streets, and once Garet glimpsed an Earth mouse, a descendant of some he had sold to the northern Thann as useful scavengers. Aside from a few sparse patches of carpet-plant and an occasional insect, Garet saw no indigenous life.

All Rictar showed him the same face. The warring Thann had used the goods they had bought from him to strip the surface, in many places, of native life. Everywhere, in niche after niche, plants and animals from Earth encroached.

And nowhere remained a single living Thann.

Once Garet was sure of that, he raised his ship from the surface of Rictar for the last time. A touch of stardrive took him beyond the interference of Barathaz. Garet then used another not-for-sale Earth

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device, this one enabling him to communicate across the gulf of light-years.

"Terrasystem control," came a voice from Earth. "Identify."

"*Terraquest*, Garet Li," he said, and recited an intricate code-number to distinguish himself from the many other far-traders.

"Ready for your report," control said.

"I have one cleared planet," Garet said, his voice toneless. "Copy: KPC 1131, II. The natives called it *Rictar*, and the star *Barathaz*. Developing Terran environment; suitable for immediate human resettlement."

"We copy. Great, more elbow-room. We'll begin to ship a few million pioneers this afternoon. That one didn't take long, did it?"

Garet slapped on a salesman's smile that felt oddly like a grimace of pain, or the rictus of a corpse. "The sale was made, the price was paid," he sang. Then, in a weary voice: "It took less than twenty-five years, control. It was easy; the natives were fairly intelligent."

Then Garet, the trader from Earth, switched off the communicator and drove his ship farther out, searching for more bargains, more payments, more worlds.

DINOSAURS

Extinct
lizard, egg, nest,
herd, hot pool, marsh, mammoth,
auk, buffalo, whale, seal, city,
human.

—Steve Rasnic Tem

HAIKU FOR THE VIKING ORBITERS

Lighting a red stage
of dunes and frosted craters:
Lens of thousand eyes.

—Robert Frazier

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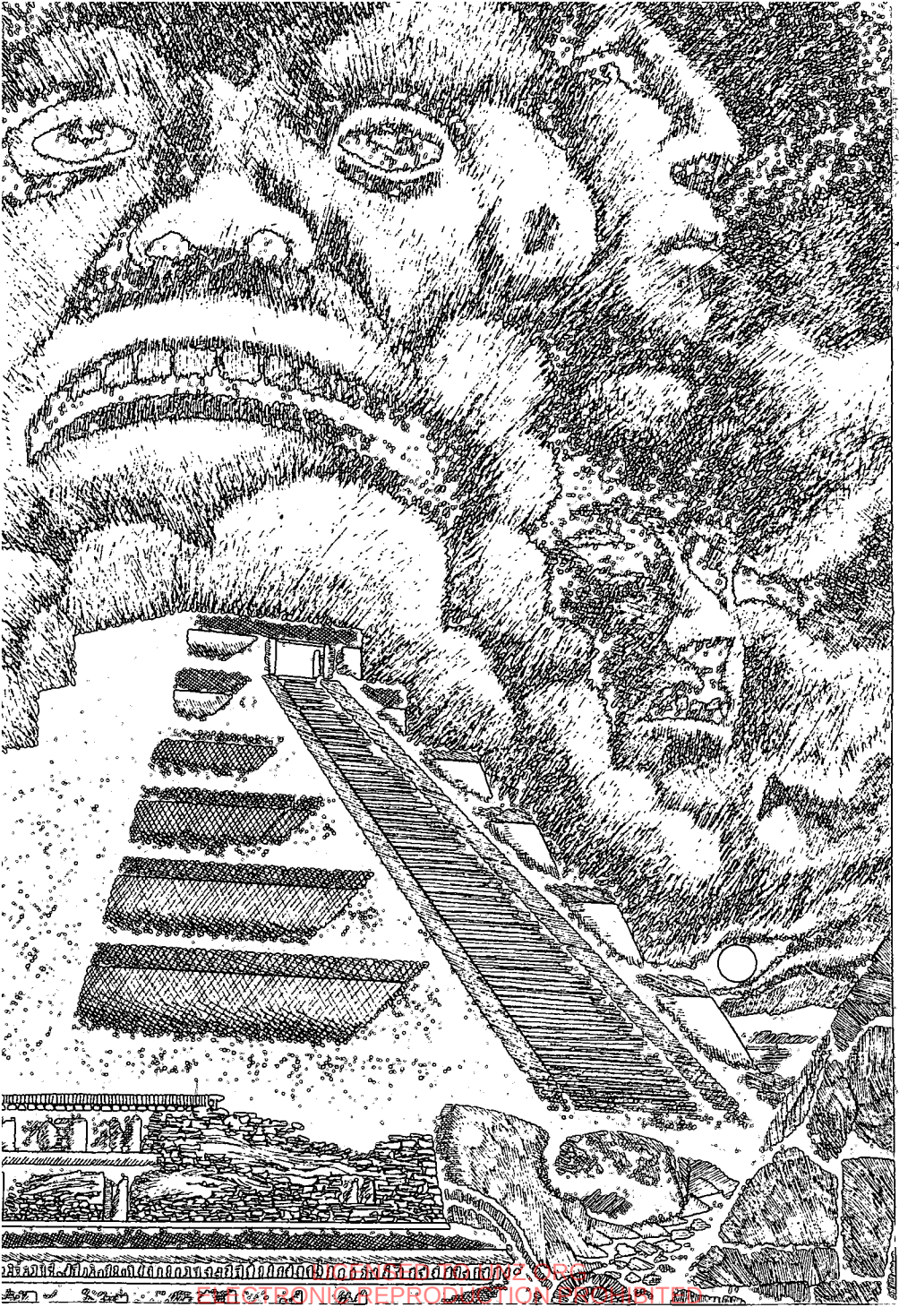

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NIGHT OF THE FIFTH SUN

by Mildred Downey Broxon

art: Ron Logan

The author has recently seen published her noteworthy novel, *Too Long a Sacrifice.*

Four suns have died before us, say the Aztecs. The first was destroyed by jaguars, the second by wind, the third by fiery rain, and the fourth by flood.

Then was born ours, the fifth sun. The god Huitzilopochtli must be fed or the sun will die. At the end of every fifty-two-year cycle, the sun grows weak.

The proper food for the sun is human hearts and blood.

Winter breathed dead cold toward the city centre. The metropolis sprawled out from what was once an island in a shallow lake. Yellow through the smog, the Pleiades wheeled up the sky. The wind ghosted through centuries of history, tossed trash down streets once trod by feathered warriors, and slithered toward the ancient place of sacrifice. No temple stood there now; the wind crept in through hospital windows.

In the basement, Jesus-Maria Lopez shivered and drew near the furnace. He opened the fire door: light glinted off shards of broken glass. Piles of it stood in cartons. He'd helped straighten the laboratories this week, and should really have carried out the trash, but time enough for that tomorrow. This was a night of death. A cold god danced in the wind.

His mother had taught him to keep careful count: tonight ended a cycle. Fifty-two years since the last New Fire: he'd been a boy of four. His aunt went into labor that night. In the morning the sun rose as usual, but his mother said Carmelita was dead. Jesus-Maria remembered weeping.

He shivered again. It was nowhere near as cold as the winter nights in Europe, during the Second War, but then he'd been twenty-one, an eager warrior. Even if death struck all around, there was honor to dying in battle. Never mind the wife and child at home.

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But he'd come back; and now he would end his days as a janitor in the old hospital, in the heart of Mexico City.

Tonight the shadows lived. Beneath the silence he could hear feathers rustle and water lap on wooden hulls. The archaeologists said a canal once lay here, a waterway to serve the temple. It had been filled in long ago, the pyramid leveled; and the conquerors had raised one of their churches on the sacred spot. A larger church, a convent, and finally a hospital followed, in an attempt to claim the site. Still, tonight he heard lapping water. And tonight tied up a bundle of years: the sun was weak and hungry.

The feather-rustle grew, became a scratching, as if bony fingers clawed the windowpane. He did not want to see what stood outside, but he rose to his feet and squared his shoulders like a man. After all, he had custody of this place.

The basement was sunk half a story into the ground, so the window stood at eye-height. First, through the darkness and grime, he saw nothing; then, by the wall, he made out a figure. Bare legs beneath a calf-length skirt, a woolen shawl over the head—what woman would seek him here? He pulled the window open.

"Grandfather?" It was a croak.

He stepped back. Of his five granddaughters, only one would roam the streets at night. At least she was alive. It was so long since he'd heard—his heart hammered. He caught his breath. "Luisa?"

The figure doubled over. He heard a stifled moan. Then, "Let me in. I'm cold, and—"

"Come around to the side." So it was down to this, for Luisa: a slut on the street, with nowhere to sleep. He latched the window and fumbled for his keys.

The cold wind, the death-wind blew her through the door. Lopez looked at the sky, but saw only yellow haze throwing back the city lights. "Come close to the fire, child." Whatever she wanted, she'd tell him in time.

The young woman fell to her knees and bit back a cry. She crouched motionless a minute, then straightened. She crept toward the furnace and held out her hands. Her fingers were thick as sausages, and the scarlet nail enamel was chipped. When she threw back her woolen shawl he saw that her features—once as fine as her mother's—had grown puffy. She dropped her shawl to the floor and faced him. He stared at her swollen belly.

"You see," she defied him, "how it is with me." Then she grew pale. Again she doubled over, but made no sound.

"Mother of God!" The old man was aghast. As an afterthought he

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added silently, "Saint Mary Magdalene, pray for her." Should not that saint have pity on a sister whore? "Tell me, child, have you no one?"

She waited until the pain stopped, then shook her head. "No one." She laughed. The sound cut like the wind. "I've been unable to—ply my trade—of late."

"Come, then, let's get you upstairs quickly." At home in the village women thought little of giving birth, but those were women of the old, pure stock. City people, even his own granddaughter, were not as strong.

He put his hand under her elbow and helped her to her feet. Behind him a cold wind made the furnace flicker. He turned back and closed the door against the draft.

In the small Coronary Care unit a man slept hooked to wires. Machines traced the ragged beating of his heart. It was weary, and parts of it had already died.

Amid the green-lighted dusk, blackness bulked in a corner. Eagle claws scrabbled across tile. Invisible wings beat the air.

The man stirred. His heart tracing leapt and twisted; the shadow flowed forward, then stopped. This was no warrior. This heart was not fit to feed the sun.

When the nurse ran into the room the man was asleep. His cardiogram seemed unchanged. She looked at the print-out and shook her head: it had been a near thing. Only then did she notice the scratches on the tiles. Someone had been moving heavy equipment, no doubt. But she'd not seen those marks when she made her rounds . . . She sniffed: a smell like surgery. She pulled back the covers to check. The wizened body lay in a white gown on spotless sheets. Why, then, was the air heavy with fresh blood?

The emergency clinic was bright and noisy. Lopez stood, a drab quiet figure, in the treatment room.

The young white-coated doctor was a Yankee, new to the staff. "Ah, Hay-soos," he said, in halting Spanish, "would you please step outside while I examine her?" Jesus nodded and left. The Yankees always had trouble with his name—as if to speak it were blasphemy. Name of God, why should that be so?

He found a bench along the wall and waited, staring straight ahead. Time passed.

The young doctor tapped him on the shoulder. Jesus looked up. "She's been in labor for a long time, and she's sick, also. Tox-e-mi-

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a." Jesus nodded at the unfamiliar word. Yes, Luisa was sick. He could see that. "I'll admit her, even though she's not our patient," the doctor went on. "She says she's had no care." He looked disapprovingly at Lopez. "She's malnourished, as well. Your granddaughter, you say?"

"Yes." Jesus-Maria did not explain. This was a private shame.

"You'll have to sign the papers, then." The doctor gestured; an orderly wheeled Luisa away.

At the admitting desk he had trouble: his eyes were poor. The receptionist helped him, a bit impatiently. There was a space on the form for the husband's name. Shamefacedly, he printed "none."

The ward windows were barred. The mirrors on the wall were steel. Sleepless, an old and hollow-eyed woman paced the night.

Darkness paused at the locked doorway, then oozed inside. The old woman cowered, and a mad smile flicked across her face. She held out her hands to the cold: "I will go with you. I will be proud to feed the sun. I shall dance up the steps, singing: take me and see!"

Years had scored her face, and madness nibbled at her brain. She was no proper sacrifice. The darkness shrank from her touch.

She stared after it, sobbing, then ran to the window. She clutched the bars and looked up at the sky. Through a rift in the smog the Pleiades gleamed, a scatter of diamonds. "The end of the cycle," she whispered, "the death of the Fifth Sun. I would have gone, but I was not chosen."

She strode to the end of the room and stared at the clouded steel. "It has come," she whispered. "The God of the Smoking Mirror rules the night." The tears on her cheeks glittered like stars.

Jesus-Maria Lopez followed his granddaughter to the labor room, but they'd put a needle in her arm to make her sleep. He could do nothing, so he went back to the basement. He was worried about the furnace.

He fretted over Luisa: she looked very ill, and the doctor seemed concerned. Women sometimes died in childbirth. Rosalia, his wife, had been lucky. She bore six; and it was cancer, at the last, that sent her to the Little Dead Ones. But remember Carmelita, his mother's youngest sister. . . .

Sunset. Sleepy chickens pecked in the dust one last time. Charcoal smoke dimmed the autumn air. The women bustling inside the hut, Carmelita's cries like a bleating goat, the men

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huddled in groups against the creeping dark.

His older sister hurried him off to bed; in the morning he heard Carmelita had died. His mother had tried to comfort him: "Carmelita is a *cihuateto,* she is in the Heaven of the Sun, now. She died in childbed; that is the same, for a woman, as being a warrior. And besides," as an afterthought, "her soul is surely with the Blessed Virgin. She was a good Catholic."

Not until later in life had he wondered at that. Such thoughts were common in his village, where his family could trace its line to before the Conquest. They were Aztec—and never, his mother added proudly, was there any Spanish blood. Those of the women who were raped or captured hanged themselves for shame.

Time passed, and in Europe the war began. Jesus-Maria wanted glory, so he crossed the ocean to fight. He came home to find the village dried up like a gourd. His mother was dead. He stayed on for a year, but finally followed the rest of the young people to the city. He, Rosalia, and the children had never been back, even on the Feast of the Dead.

Years later, at the Anthropology Museum, he saw the stone statues of *cihuatetos,* their hands clenched, their teeth bared in skull-like grins. With a shudder he remembered Carmelita.

In the city his children learned city ways and wed whom they wished, without asking advice or permission. So Spanish blood at last came to their line. Pedro, his eldest, married a bank teller, a handsome woman who bore him three children before running away to Los Angeles. Of those three, the first was Luisa.

Such was life. Now he tended the furnace and swept floors in the hospital, and Luisa sold her body on the street.

He shrugged and checked the furnace. The fire was almost dead.

The young woman lay alone in a two-bed room. Her face was shiny with sweat, her black hair spread tangled on the pillow, and her fingers clutched the sheet. Every few moments she was wracked by contractions. She made no sound.

In the corner, darkness grew solid. A woman in childbirth—yes, here was a tasty sacrifice. The bravery, the fear, the pain all added spice. It was proper, it was as things should be. This woman came mostly of the old stock, from those who had known proper reverence, and fed their gods with human hearts and blood.

The darkness hefted an obsidian knife and savored the future.

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The burner showed only one low flame. Jesus-Maria muttered under his breath, a combination curse and prayer. According to the old ways all fires should be extinguished tonight, until the new one was kindled on the breast of a sacrifice. But there were no sacrifices any more. Surely the ancient gods no longer expected to be fed with lives.

Water slapped against a wood-hulled boat, and feathers rustled. A whisper: "The star-cluster is high. A bundle of years has been gathered and tied. Tonight the fifth sun will gutter out."

In the darkness Jesus-Maria saw a glint as of black volcanic glass, held by a dim shape. No, that was only his old coat swaying in the draft, and the light shone off broken lab ware. The shards were long and dangerous. He should have carried the boxes out, but he had no wish to brave the death-cold wind.

It was blowing away the overcast, he saw. The Pleiades gleamed like a shattered wineglass.

He turned back to the furnace. Nothing worked, no matter how he adjusted the oil flow. It must be some trick of air currents. He'd have to figure a way to screen it. Tomorrow. Tonight he was so tired, so cold. . . .

The knock woke him from a doze. He opened the door. Julio the orderly stood, impressive in his white smock. "They—they sent me to find you, Jesus. Your granddaughter—" he swallowed. "They have summoned the priest. You should go to her."

Wordless, Jesus followed.

Yes, it was good. The world might be spared for another cycle. This woman would suffice. By the time she claimed her reward as a cihuateteo, *she would have earned it well.*

It seemed she was a willing sacrifice. Yes, the sun would be fed. The world need not end tonight.

The darkness waited to take the offering. It was patient. Old as it was, it could afford to be.

The priest closed the door and wiped spittle from his cheek. His hand shook. "She would not see me," he muttered. Then, to Lopez, "Are you her grandfather?"

Lopez nodded.

"Reason with the child. Tell her to confess, no matter what she has done. Her life is in danger. She may well die in her sins! I will wait." He turned, went to a chair, and opened a prayer book. His movements were angry.

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The doctor looked up as Lopez entered. "As I thought, she's been in labor for days. The water broke a long time ago. There may be infection."

Lopez heard all this but paid little heed. The face of the girl on the pillow could have been that of Rosalia, his wife, now that Luisa's sharp Spanish features were blurred by swelling. Mixed-blood or no, she resembled their side of the family, too.

"Luisa—"

"Go away! I do not want your Sacrament!"

"Luisa, it is your grandfather, not the priest. There is no priest here, Luisa."

She opened her eyes and searched the room. Her gaze lingered in the darkest corner. She licked her lips. "Grandfather?" She did not look away from the shadows.

"I am here, Luisa. Why did you send the priest away? You know you are very ill."

"I do not wish to make confession. I am not sorry. I regret nothing. Not even—this." She looked into the distance and half-smiled.

Lopez saw nothing in the dimness. But as he turned back, out of the corner of his eye—*the plumed headdress, a flash of bright color, a black knife*—no, when he looked again there was only a curtain swaying in the breeze.

Luisa began to cry out; to stop herself she sank her teeth into her wrist. "You'd better leave now," the doctor said. "She must stay quiet. We will keep you informed." He pulled back the sheet: Lopez caught a glimpse of bright blood.

The priest looked up as he passed. Lopez shook his head. "Pray for her. Perhaps she is mad."

The priest's face smoothed. "Perhaps so, indeed, poor child."

They knew where to find him. The furnace needed tending. Best a man have something to do on a night when death danced in the wind.

"I go gladly," Luisa murmured in Nahuatl. "Take me."

"What did she say?" the Yankee doctor asked the nurse. "I didn't understand."

"Nor did I," the nurse replied. "She is probably delirious." Neither of them spoke the ancient Aztec tongue.

The old man opened the furnace door and peered inside. All seemed as it should be, but the flame was dying. —In preparation for the offering: a high-born victim, a worthy sacrifice. This is the fifty-

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second year, the end of the cycle. Tonight the sun will be destroyed and the world will end, as it has four times already—

"Of course no one now believes that." *He must raise his voice over the sound of lapping water, paddles dipping into the canal: more of them, now. The canoes were gathering on the ancient waterways. The square of the window had been grey with street lights and starshine, but of a sudden it grew black. He stepped over and saw, near the hospital, dwarfing it and the old church, the pyramid dark against the sky. On its top torches flared and were snuffed; in the distance he saw the sheen of a long-buried lake.*

On nearby rooftops people gathered. They wore feathers, blankets, bright woven garments; and, like the buildings that held them, they were somehow insubstantial. Children cried and were hushed.

The furnace spat one yellow-blue flame against the dark. He hurried back, turned the dial for more oil, and struck a match. The flame shrank to nothing in his hand.

Julio knocked on the door. "Hurry, Jesus, hurry!" His voice was urgent. "She's had a convulsion—the doctor says she is dying. If you wish to be with her—"

"I will come immediately." *So.* At the end of the cycle, in the fifty-second year, Luisa, my little Luisa, goes to feed the sun. Was it all for this? The withered village, our move to the city, Luisa's birth, her taking to the streets—was it all that she might be sacrificed in childbirth and serve the sun as a *cihuateto?* There are no more offerings, in this last hungry age. My little Luisa will die in her sins, unconfessed and unabsolved. Will it be Hell or the Western Paradise of the Sun for her?

If the sun is not fed it will die, and the world will perish. No matter that no one believes this now. It is nonetheless true.

Julio knocked again. "Jesus! Hurry, I beg you!"

"Go ahead. I follow in a moment." —Even if no one knows, it is still true. Luisa, child, you should not die in your sins. I am an old man. The sun must be fed.—"Go ahead, Julio," he called, and waited until he heard footsteps fade away.

He dragged the carton of broken glass into the last glow of firelight and selected a long, thick shard. He held it before him. "Dear God, receive my spirit." He did not know which god he meant. "We do not believe. We fear." The glass point gleamed. He raised it high and bore downward to his heart.

He breathed pain. Through a veil he saw the furnace flicker out.

The darkness tasted a warrior's death. It left the room where the young woman lay. Tonight the sun would feast.

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The city woke. Traffic hooted over ancient causeways. Few who hurried to work knew that today began another cycle of fifty-two years. None cared that they lived because Huitzilopochtli, and the sun, had fed.

The nurse handed Luisa her newborn son. The mother took him and smiled. "I'll name him Jesus-Maria." Through the window, a shaft of sunlight touched the child; she shuddered and clasped him to her breast.

SECOND SOLUTION TO HUMPTY FALLS AGAIN
(from page 53)

Humpty's use of quotation marks clearly indicates that he is asking for the longest word in the phrase "the English language." The word, of course, is *language*.

The egg was so surprised when I finally guessed his riddle that he fell off the wall. The sound of the crash woke me with a start.

I want to thank Stephen Barr for Humpty's riddle. Incidentally, if we ignore hyphenated words, made-up words, chemical-compound names, medical terms, surnames, place names and other artificially constructed words, the longest common words in English are such 21-letter words as *disproportionableness* and *indistinguishableness*. The longest dictionary word (aside from the exceptions noted above) is still *antidisestablishmentarianism*, which can be lengthened by replacing *-ism* with *-istically*.

The two best known long invented words are Shakespeare's *honorificabilitudinitatibus* (spoken by Costard the Clown in *Love's Labour's Lost*) and Julie Andrews' *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. Note that the vowels in Shakespeare's word alternate with consonants throughout. In his classic work on word play, *Language on Vacation*, Dmitri Borgmann reveals that the letters can be rearranged to spell "Bath is idiotic in bountiful air," and also the Latin sentence, *Hi ludi F. Baconis nati tuiti orbi*, which means "These plays, F. Bacon's offspring, are preserved for the world."

It is often asserted that the longest word in the Oxford English Dictionary is *floccinaucinihilipilification*, meaning the action of estimating as worthless, but the word is usually spelled with four hyphens.

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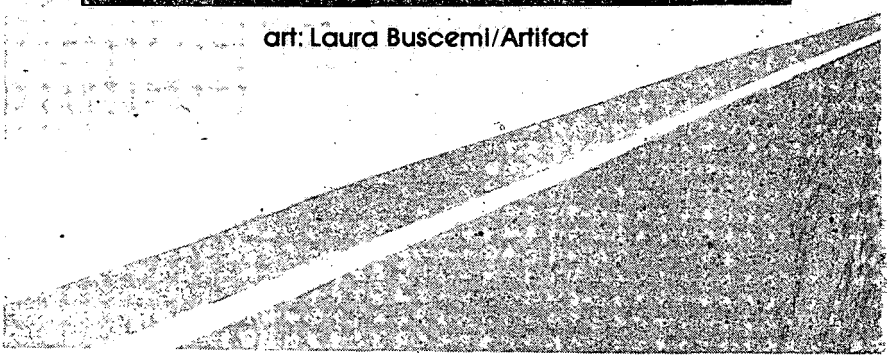
ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

by Daniel Keys Moran

The author claims to be "the only busboy ever to contribute to your magazine." (Not true, unless perhaps ex-buspersons don't count.) He has announced his candidacy for God, when next that office becomes open, and reports that his campaign is succeeding—in Southern California, at least. This is his first sale.

art: Laura Buscemi/Artifact



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Consider the explosion of a thermonuclear weapon.

From an insignificant collection of radioactives and supporting hardware, the bomb expands within seconds to a thundering mushroom cloud of stunning size and power.

(Psychedelic mushrooms, yeah, yeah, *yeah.*)

Hold this image most clearly in mind, please—small metal egg of the technological demons to the fires of a somewhat less sophisticated era's Hell; **Flash**. Do you see it, do you have the image, do you *understand?*

To comprehend the essence of the personality of Georges Mordreaux, take this image, this process, and reverse it.

(Add the sound of Japanese wind chimes. Georges Mordreaux is a happy man.

Naturally.)

[A brief aside: It is the opinion of the author that the sound of an atomic bomb exploding in reverse is **squilchgmp!**

[The author is willing to concede that he could be wrong, but adds that, until such time as he is proven incorrect, he will continue to hold this opinion.]

2212 Gregorian.

Marchand the Huntress went into the deep Burns, after her youngest daughter, a five-year-old who, knowing no better, had wandered in. The Clan, migrating through the Big Desert by the Waters, had pressed on, expecting never to see Marchand again.

It was three days later that Marchand caught up with the Clan, her youngest daughter Dilann held in her arms. Marchand died within a day of catching up with the Clan.

Dilann survived; and before her sixth birthday the Clan, or what was left of the Clan after the desert trek, had reached the forests by the Big Waters.

What was left of the Clan prospered. Dilann became known as Dilann d'Arsennette, the lady of the fires.

Dilann's children, every one, had silver eyes.

1917 Gregorian.

When Georges had been a younger man—not a young man, no, but younger—the world had gotten together for a while and declared a social event called the Great War, and later, World War One. (Rumors to the contrary, there was no American aviator named Snoopy, famed for his duels with the Red Baron. That all came later.)

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Georges Mordreaux, through some silliness on his part and the jealousy of the husband of a wife, found himself in the middle of this silly conflict, yes *sir*.

What should have been his last thought, as the German soldier came up out of the trench, bayonet in hand, was *that's a muddy bayonet*, as though it could possibly make any difference whether he was killed with a clean bayonet or a dirty one. (Georges was a perfectionist. Even when it was in style, some years in his future, he refused to drink his milk out of a dirty glass.)

Georges came to some hours later—so the overhead sun, peeking cautiously through some clouds, informed him—with his corporal sitting next to him, calmly smoking a cigarette.

The corporal, who was not yet nineteen years old, and who, Georges later heard, became a Hero Taking a Hill that Nobody Cared About Anyway, nodded to George when he woke up. "How you feeling, Georges?"

Georges tried to answer, found that he could not, having, uh, no vocal cords to speak of. He felt them knitting as he thought of it, and managed, a bit hoarsely, to say, "Wonderful. Would I be alive, by any chance?"

The corporal shook his head decisively. "No. I am afraid, Georges, that you are quite dead, no head. Very dead."

Georges sat up, cautiously. "Ah, well. Did I make it to Heaven, by any chance?"

The corporal glanced about; shell-torn ground, as far as the eye could see, rusty barbed wire fences strung on rotting grimy wood posts, dead men still lying where they had fallen, patchy clouds that did not quite hide the sun, but gave off an annoying drizzle that muddied the ground and dampened the soldier's clothing and made smoking a matter of sheer artistry and determination. . . .

The corporal shook his head. "Don't think so, Georges." He paused, decided that there was nothing left of his cigarette, and flicked it away. He slung his rifle over his right shoulder. "I talked to the sarge. You're outa my outfit."

Georges shrugged, and found that his head did not quite come off. "Ah, well."

The corporal walked away without speaking, leaving Georges there in the mud; and that was the last time Georges saw him, since three days later he became a Hero of the French Republic, his last thoughts being of Georges Mordreaux. (Ironically, it was a German boy with a bayonet who got him, too, although the resemblance stops there. The German boy—he was actually younger than the French

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corporal, and the names of both are unimportant, since neither survived the war—this German boy put his bayonet in from behind, and the corporal did not resurrect. Ah, well.)

Georges tried to whistle as the corporal walked away. He did quite creditably.

Georges thought, with some irritation at himself, that there ought to be some point to be learned from having one's head cut off, and surviving the experience. He could not think of one, however, aside from the obvious. He was very glad to be alive.

In some ways, thought Georges Mordreaux, *I am a very shallow fellow.*

Ah, well.

[The author notes that in the year 1917, Georges Mordreaux was two hundred and five years old.

[Perhaps he was a bit shallow, at that.]

One of the definitions of the word "entropy," as given by Webster's Third New International Dictionary, is: "The degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity."

Georges never read dictionaries. He considered them, being as they were largely artificial attempts to impose order on the anarchistic languages of man, very much beneath him.

About order-imposers, as dictionary compilers; Georges was better at it.

Indeed, one might consider Georges Mordreaux as "The Enemy of Entropy."

Georges liked to.

When the Big Crunch came, and the superpowers decided to sterilize the face of the planet, the freeways survived.

(Vista: A thousand-and-one mushroom clouds dotting the face of a small planet. Terminal acne. Winding lazily among the mushrooms, strips of concrete, over-extended roads, observed the goings-on, and later, when the barbarians and the mutants came howling out of the radioactive Burns to trek the surface of the freeways among the dead shells of the automobiles, the freeways might have giggled to themselves. Eventually the cars were dragged from the freeways for use in making metal weapons, and the freeways were left alone to contemplate their freewayness.)

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712 A.B.C. (After the Big Crunch.)

A small brown-haired elf, silver-eyed, brown-clothed, surveyed the clearing before her as she lay crouched in the bushes at the south end. The elf's name was Jalian d'Arsennette, and she was the straight-line female descendant of Dilann d'Arsennette.

The clearing was a ten-second run for Jalian, from one end to the other; and it was in clear view of the Clan House.

Ten seconds.

Jalian drew her legs up under her, checked her knife to make sure the sheath was securely tied down, peered toward the Clan House, one last time—she ran.

Ten seconds can be forever, to a six-year old. *Run*, and *run*, and *run* . . . Jalian reached the trees at the north end of the clearing, her foot catching in a long tuft of the brown grass at the last instant, sending her tumbling. She did her best to convert it into a roll, as she had been taught; but still the wind was knocked from her lungs, and she had trouble breathing when she regained her feet. Fighting silently to pull air into her emptied lungs, Jalian squirmed up to the edge of the cover and peered out. There was no unusual activity over at the long wooden Clan House, nothing out of the ordinary for early morning in the thaw-time . . . she had not been seen.

Jalian grinned to herself. It would be late afternoon, now, before she was missed, and by then she would be long gone. They would know, of course, where she had gone, when she failed to show up to help with the preparation of the Ceremony meal; but by then, with luck, it would be too late. If the Huntresses started out for her the instant they became aware of her absence, Jalian would still have had an eight-hour start.

With luck, before nightfall Jalian would be in the land of the gods and the demons. She did not think that anyone but Ralesh would try to follow her there—and perhaps not even Ralesh.

Jalian turned, her long brown hair swirling out behind her, and vanished into the trees. She left no trail.

None.

Here we have a time traveller, and her name is Jalian. Yes, Jalian d'Arsennette, except that there have been some changes.

She is no longer six years old, and her hair is no longer brown. It is pure, ice-white, completely untinted. She is something like twenty-six years old; her eyebrows and eyelashes are still brown, and it gives her features an artificial seeming. (It is not.) She is very, very lovely, her skin just slightly transparent.

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None of the above is important.

She has eyes. Even in the twentieth century (Gregorian), her eyes are something exceptional. The irises are silver. They have always been silver, of course; but now they are something else and more, silver and blue and green and pink and purple with flashes of gold red, but mostly silver still.

(Clan Silver-Eyes prospered where the Real Indians and the barbarians did not, at least partially because of the silver irises; they were quite lovely, true, but they also detected abnormal radiation levels quite capably. After the Big Crunch, this was a survival mechanism.)

Jalian's eyes can and do cause almost instant desire in any functioning male, and in not a few females besides. They are the eyes of someone who has seen too much, knows too much; and knows that there is nothing she can do about what she knows.

The Big Crunch is coming.

Jalian d'Arsennette is viewed, by the twentieth century, as a tall, silver-eyed elf of great beauty. She has the strange habit of not meeting other people's eyes.

Jalian, we love you.

712 A.B.C.

Jalian pushed herself, moving through the light woods silently nonetheless, almost invisible to the sun, a silvered shadow, mingling with the other shadows of morning, seeming almost at times to be walking in other times and places, and not the one in which her physical self moved.

It was late morning when Jalian reached the place.

Ruins of the old world could be found all about, wherever one looked. Old buildings, the frames of the *karz*, even, in some places, where ancient builders had lined concrete with polymer bases, stretches of good roads. Still, for Jalian, none of these, not even the very few good roads, matched the straight and clean and serene beauty of her place:

The Big Road.

Like the path of a thrown knife, the Big Road stretched away as far as the eye could see, out toward the Big Desert by the Waters, that legend said the Clan had walked out of in the days after the Big Crunch. As far as Jalian could see, the Big Road ran true.

The Big Road, where Jalian came to it, was bordered by one of the largest and worst of the Burns; if one had known the Big Road before the bombs fell, that person might have been able to tell Jalian

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that the Big Road was not supposed to be partially melted; but there was nobody to tell Jalian that, and she supposed that the Big Road had always been that way.

(Even before the missiles came burning from the sky, this spot had held a laboratory in which there were radioactive materials stored for testing. When the bombs went down and then up again, strange things had happened there.)

That had been more than seven centuries ago; to Jalian's eyes, the Burn still glowed faintly.

Jalian stood at the spot where she usually entered the Big Road. It was a desolate spot at the edge of the concrete, where a plant that vaguely resembled ivy had survived the radiation long enough to breach the Big Road's protective guard rail. Dirt and dust, working their ways into the body of the dead ivy plant, had formed a small, natural incline that Jalian was able to scramble up and make her way onto the concrete of the Big Road itself. She paused at the very edge of the Big Road, her feet still on dirt but only a step away from the concrete.

This would only be the second time that Jalian had set foot on the Big Road.

The first time she had run away, half a year ago, Jalian had not made it to the end of the Big Road; and the land of the gods and the demons that was supposed to be at the other end.

This time, Jalian had an eight-hour head start. They would not catch her.

They would not.

The twentieth century, as viewed by Jalian d'Arsennette, consists of freeways.

(The twentieth century saw the birth of the thermonuclear explosive and the freeway. Jalian could almost forgive one for the other.

Almost.)

712 A.B.C.

One step, and then two, and Jalian stood for a frozen timeless moment on the unnatural hardness of the concrete of the Big Road itself.

Then the paralysis broke; and, shivering slightly, Jalian walked to the center of the road, where there had once been a painted divider line.

The freeway ran away from her, straight and true and clean,

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protected as though by the gods. (The winds, here, were too sporadic to erode much. Plants, which in other places grew up through the asphalt and crumbled the man-made structures, here stood no chance against the radioactive desert. The freeway itself, cambered from the center, was regularly cleaned of the dirt that built up on its surface by the summer rains.)

At the age of six, to Jalian d'Arsennette, it made more sense that the Big Road was protected by the gods. (Or the demons, perhaps, although Jalian did not like to think about that.)

For how long Jalian simply stood on the Big Road, the sun burning down on her, her eyes seeking into the distance for the end of the Big Road, she never knew. She came back from infinity, slowly, with the thoughts in her mind:

Mountains behind me, desert to my right, forest far to the left, and the Big Road far ahead . . .

That moment, her thin body filled with the ecstasy of a dimly-perceived greater reality, Jalian remembered for the rest of her life.

The moment ended and she ran.

Jalian had not made it to the end of the Big Road, the time before that, because she had not run fast enough. This time she would not make that mistake.

Run and *run* and *run* . . .

The freeway stretched before her.

Georges Mordreaux is an interesting man. Aside from the fact that entropy tends to decrease in his vicinity, there are eight of him.

Yes, eight. Not all on the same timeline, of course.

[It is a shame, but none of these eight ever happened to be present when a thermonuclear weapon was exploded. Ah, well.

[Georges—our Georges—did once meet Einstein. This is not the same as being present when a thermonuclear weapon is exploded, but it is the closest that the author can come up with on short notice. He has criticized Georges for this, and been blessed with the response, "Ah, well." There are times when the author agrees with Georges that he is in some ways a very shallow fellow. All eight of him.]

712 A.B.C.

Jalian was running automatically, her body pushing itself without too much conscious direction from her mind, which concerned itself with the end of the Big Road. What, she wondered to herself, would the land of the gods and the demons be like? She decided that it

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would be a strange place indeed . . . something with bright, bright colors, and very loud noises. Very loud.

With a shock more immense than anything she had ever felt before in her young life, Jalian realized that there was something *on the Big Road.* Her legs stumbled, then stopped. She stood there in the middle of the old freeway, her chest heaving, her brown tunic splotchy with sweat, looking at the building that had suddenly grown up on the freeway.

She stood there like that, quiet and motionless but for her breathing, for two minutes that stretched into three. Once she drew her knife from its sheath; then, looking back to the large building, she shook her head against the silliness and put it back with an impatient movement. Jalian, even at the age of six, knew the uses of a knife.

The action broke her paralysis, and Jalian found a strange, powerful fury growing in her. Here, in *her* holy place, on *her* Big Road, somebody had grown a building.

The six-year-old Jalian d'Arsennette, even through the worst anger that she had ever experienced in her life, knew that there was nothing she could do about this building on her Big Road. With extreme reluctance, she turned on her heel and began to run back. She would be home nearly an hour and a half before she would be needed for the ceremony meal, but that was of no account. When she told Ralesh about what she had done, she would be badly punished, perhaps even ceremonially scarred; but Jalian's mother would do *something* about the tall, thin building that had grown up on Jalian's Big Road.

Jalian d'Arsennette had no way of knowing that the "building" was a starship.

1968 Gregorian.

Georges Mordreaux sat behind the wheel of a green '66 Camaro, travelling northward on California's coast highway. Georges Mordreaux was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with cheerful nondescript features, light blue eyes and light brown hair. He smiled a lot.

The Camaro ran smoothly, with a sort of leashed power that a jet pilot might have recognized, but which was utterly out of place in a green 1966 model Camaro. (Or any other color Camaro.)

The machine ran . . . well, "better than new" was the term that came immediately to Georges' mind. Georges did not think that the car would crack the sound barrier. It was too aerodynamically inefficient.

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Georges had bought the thing, in a very poor condition, two weeks ago, on the East Coast. He had not filled it once on the way west.

"Better than new" was probably the correct term.

Georges whistled as he drove. He was not very good at it, and besides, the car radio was competing. It did not occur to Georges to turn the radio off. To be fair, though, it is not likely that Georges *could* have turned the radio off.

Georges whistled, driving north. He smiled quite a lot.

How probable is it that the world's only time traveller should encounter Georges Mordreaux?

Entropy is not certain. It is possible, although most unlikely, that an object may spontaneously gain more energy, become more orderly. Most unlikely.

One might best consider Georges Mordreaux as an improbability locus.

There.

1968 Gregorian.

Forty miles north of San Luis Obispo, Georges Mordreaux saw a hitchhiker, walking briskly along the right shoulder of the highway. A second, closer look altered his impression slightly; walking along the roadside, yes; a hitchhiker, no. Her thumb was not out, and she paid no attention to the few cars on this section of the freeway.

What stood out about her, however, was her hair, her clothing, and her skin. She was dressed in a white jumpsuit, and carried a light-blue satchel on one shoulder. Her hair hung almost to the small of her back, long and straight and undeniably white, reflecting light brilliantly. Her skin, where the rolled-up sleeves of the jumpsuit showed the flesh of the arms, was almost transparently white. The jumpsuit legs were tucked into the tops of knee-length black boots, and there was a long knife attatched to the right boot, at the calf.

Georges smiled to himself absently, and brought the car to a halt next to the girl. He leaned over and rolled down the right-hand window.

"Do you need a ride, miss?" he called after the white-clad figure, which had continued to walk when he stopped the car, not turning back. His voice held very faint traces of a French accent.

The girl continued to walk, ignoring Georges, and he called, "Miss?" a bit more loudly.

Jalian d'Arsennette y ken Selvren turned around, intending to

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inform this stranger that she was quite content walking, in her iciest tone of voice

/light blue eyes smiling at me and there is power that shines on him and pours from him broad shoulders plain face brown-blond hair and the power he is smiling at me/

/silver eyes—oh, *entropy*/

when something strange happened.

"Freeways," said Jalian d'Arsennette, with a liquid voice and an accent that Georges had never heard before, "were made to be walked upon." Georges got out of the car; and Jalian watched him, waiting; not unsure or confused or wondering, simply waiting for what would happen next.

Georges Mordreaux stood at the side of the still-running green Camaro, looking at the girl who stood at the edge of the cement, on a small stretch of gravel, who was looking back at him with very silver eyes; and suddenly he was more in love than he had been since the age of nineteen.

You know, *that* had been in 1731.

1969 Gregorian.

Ralesh d'Arsennette y ken Selvren, Elder Huntress of the Clan Silver-Eyes, lay comatose in the hospital that the ambulance had taken her to. The doctors who had examined her fully expected her to die. The knife, and the two strange gadgets that had been clipped to her belt, had been put into the personal effects storage.

The strange woman lay in a coma for two days, a glucose solution dripping slowly into her veins.

On the third day, the silver-eyed freak was gone from the room in intensive care, and her personal effects were missing from storage.

In place of the three items that she took, the Elder Huntress of Clan Silver-Eyes left two things: a male intern and a female nurse. The nurse had been tied and gagged and knocked unconscious. The intern, who had simply not been born the right sex, had his throat cut from ear to ear.

1968 Gregorian.

"Walk?" asked Georges Mordreaux blankly. "On a freeway?"

Jalian nodded silently.

Georges appeared to consider it. "Where are you headed?"

"I am not," she replied softly, "headed anywhere. One place seems as good to me as another." Jalian paused, then added, "As long as

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it's on a freeway."

"What are you?" asked Georges abruptly.

Jalian studied him, curiously. "I could ask you that question myself. You are like no male I have ever known in my life."

Georges flashed a grin at her. "Of course not. Where are you from, originally? I don't recognize your accent."

Jalian's lips parted as though to reply, then closed. She made a gesture of helplessness, and turned to leave. She stopped in the act and said to Georges, "There is a bridge. It is fifteen minutes' walk from here. I will wait for you there, for a little while." She gestured to the car, somehow managing to convey supreme contempt. "Do not come in that, if you come." She began walking without waiting for a reply.

Georges watched the retreating figure for a long time. He was horribly tempted to get back in the car and leave and never be faced with this white-haired woman again. Georges tended to think of himself as something a cut above the ordinary mortal, almost semi-divine, and it was a fact that Georges Mordreaux tended to awe people. It was strange to find someone who had the ability to set herself up as his equal on their very first meeting.

It was a long time before he started after her, on foot.

Behind him, the Camaro's engine began to falter.

Jalian d'Arsennette and Georges Mordreaux stood at the edge of the bridge, watching a small, nearly dry river pass underneath. Far overhead, a dark cumulus cloud, heavy with rain, was moving toward the bridge, its shadow slowly moving up the river towards the two figures on the bridge, second by second killing the sunlight on the moving water.

"I like bridges the best," said Jalian absently. Beneath them, they could barely hear the murmur of the water as it ran. "There were no bridges on the Big Road, not even any places where bridges used to be. The first time I came to a bridge, I was almost afraid to walk across it."

Georges grinned his best. "You know, I have not the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Jalian was looking at the guard rail on the bridge. It was made of iron, and was badly rusted; it reached to Jalian's waist. Jalian ran her hands over the rough metal quietly, almost as though she were studying the texture and shape. After a long and stretching silence, she said, "What is your name?"

Georges said, "Georges," absently. The breeze was blowing her

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long, silky hair toward him. He reached out with one hand, tentatively, and ran the tips of his fingers along its surface. Jalian shivered, very faintly.

Georges said, in a voice that would not have carried one meter, "I think I am in love with you."

"Georges what?"

"Hmm?"

"Is Georges all there is?" Jalian persisted.

Georges leaned back against the railing, not looking at her. Where Jalian's hands had touched the rail, the rust was smeared faintly. Small patches of clean steel began to appear with creeping slowness. "Mordreaux," said Georges finally. "Georges Mordreaux."

Jalian straightened and brushed her hands off on her white jumpsuit, leaving faint orange splotches behind. "My name is Jalian. Jalian of the Fires of the Group of People with Silver Eyes in the long form." She moved closer to him and barely touched one of his hands with one of hers. "Does your name mean anything?"

Georges shook his head, more aware of her touch than he had ever been before of any other physical contact with a woman in his long life. "Not that I know of." He met her eyes, for the second time since that first one by the car

/self of calmness, power running through deep quiet channels worn smooth, control, tight, tight control in chords of joy/

/self of self, most alone, sere and black rivers of concrete, frozen in grief, awareness of endings, views of the Big Crunch/

and Jalian's desolate grief and aloneness cut into Georges with a strength that shattered his control utterly.

When Jalian spoke, her eyes averted from Georges, her voice actually trembled. "How old are you, Georges?"

"Two . . ." Georges licked his lips and said, "Two hundred and fifty years old, about."

Jalian turned slightly away from Georges, so that even by accident she could not meet his eyes. "I think I had better leave."

"No," whispered Georges. Centimeter by centimeter, his control began to reassert itself. "I am neither Ralesh nor ghess'Rith, Jalian. I . . ."

Jalian started to speak, and her voice broke on the first word. She began again. "All of the people I have ever loved, Georges . . . they have wanted me to be something other than what I was, and I cannot *be* that. If . . ."

Georges interrupted, speaking forcefully. "I know what you are, Jalian. I *know*."

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"But . . . the Big Crunch . . ."

"Is *not your fault.*" Georges's voice softened. "Jalian, there is nothing worse than giving up hope."

"It happened," she said flatly.

"Oh, to be sure," agreed Georges cheerfully. "It happened once. Need it happen twice?"

Jalian's voice had lost its tremble, but still she did not look at Georges. "What do you mean?"

"The nature of time," said Georges solemnly, "is a mystery to the best of us." He paused. "Einstein said that to me, the one time we met."

"I . . . do not understand," said Jalian.

"Second precept of semi-divinity," said Georges cheerfully, "is 'Don't Worry About It.' "

"I shall not worry about it, then," said Jalian, hesitantly, "but . . . who is Ine-stine?"

"Well," said Georges comfortably, "that's rather a long story. You see . . ."

They walked away down the freeway together.

In the spot they had vacated, for five meters in either direction, the iron railings were completely free of rust.

[And so it came to be that Jalian d'Arsennette and Georges Mordreaux walked the freeways of the world together, for a while.

[Let us note, here, the two Precepts of Semi-Divinity:

(1) Mind Thine Own Business.

(2) Don't Worry About It.]

The alien gods came to Earth in the early part of the twenty-eighth century, as measured from the death of a man who was nailed to a tree for telling people that it was all right to love each other. They set down their starship on a strip of what appeared, to them, to be a primitive road of sorts. Searching about for the civilization that had produced it, they encountered nothing. This, the condition of the road, and the very obvious fact of a cataclysmic nuclear war written across the planetary landscape, convinced them that there was no civilization left to bother with.

Three days after they set down, eighty of Clan Silver-Eyes' best Huntresses climbed onto the concrete of the Big Road at the spot that Jalian showed them, and began the long run toward the ship.

At their head was a woman named Ralesh, who would one day be Elder Huntress.

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712 A.B.C.

In the Clan House, well past sunset, by the light of fire and a strange device that the alien gods had set up, the Silver-Eyes' eight Elder Huntresses conferred with the Alien Gods.

For reasons of their own, the gods had insisted that Jalian be allowed to attend the meeting. The Eldest Huntress, Morine de Kelvin y ken Selvren, had argued, to no avail: Morine had acquiesced with ill grace.

Of the eight Elder Huntresses, five, including Ralesh and Morine, had been taught to read and write, and had been forced to learn the basic rudiments of chemistry and engineering. Although the resource depletion of the elder days had forced their simple lifestyle upon them, the Silver-Eyes had—as the Real Indians and the mutants did not—the capability, given metals and a power source, to rebuild a technical civilization.

It was this that the Alien Gods were offering them.

But first, one of the gods had to explain to them what an alternate timeline was; and that took a long, long while.

If it is true, as said, that it is only the first time that a person sees a thing that he truly looks at it, then it is probable that Jalian saw the god more clearly than any of the others in the Clan House. Even Jalian's mother, looking at the god, saw only a sort of very large bear with tentacles and something like strings of lace hanging about its upper regions.

To Jalian, at the age of six, edging seven, when most things are new and different, the alien god was a four-limbed, almost rectangular hunk of furred flesh, with long, light-purple furred tentacles, except at the tips, where the fur faded away. The lace about the god's upper regions, Jalian somehow knew, were ears, far more sensitive and discriminating than anything a human could possess. Watching the god, she could already, she thought, discern expressions.

/?/

The god used a machine to talk to the Silver-Eyes; his own voice was only a sort of very high-pitched whine that the Silver-Eyes had difficulty hearing. The machine that spoke for the god used the voice of Jalian's mother, the first human who had spoken to it. At one point, as Jalian watched the gods, she heard something about travelling in time, sideways, in the back of her mind. She was about to ask a question of the alien gods

/greetings be/

when something happened.

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Of the four alien gods in the room, only one was speaking—or at least, only one was emitting the high-pitched whines that preceded the occasions when the machine spoke. For some reason, Jalian found her attention irresistibly drawn toward one of the other alien gods, who was—standing?—near the back of the main hall of the Clan House, where neither the cool white light that the alien gods had brought, nor the flickering yellow of the firelight, much illuminated things. This particular alien god

/ghess'Rith/

had not moved since entering the room, but somehow Jalian was certain that he was watching her. If

/naming be?/

/jalian. jalian of the fires./

/fires be?/

/the light that dances and burns./

/fascinates. i am ghess'Rith./

/how are we talking?/

/mindvoice. faster and clearer than voices of sound./

/then why do you use the machine to talk to the Elder Huntresses?/

/deaf be. too old to learn new ways, is may be./

/why did you come here? you put a building on my Big Road, and now i'm in trouble./

/apology. ship-not-alive-which-thinks-in-numbers needed level area. Big Road seemed not-in-use./

/(severely) the gods and demons *won't* like it./

/persons be?/

/the gods and demons. at the other end of the Big Road./

/confusion be./

/gods and demons . . . powerful creatures. (seriously) they occasionally eat *bad girls*. i am not a *bad girl*./

/understanding be. cautionary images./

/?/

/not important. question be./

/what?/

/wish rapid learning of culture be? closer contact?/

Jalian stared through the dimness of the main hall, her gaze not leaving the still-motionless form of ghess'Rith. She was completely unaware of the complete silence that had settled in the Clan House, or of the fact that the Elder Huntresses were watching her with something like awe.

/yes./

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Jalian had a sudden, fragmented impression of something vast and powerful, glowing dull red with heat, rushing at her out of the cold eternal darkness. It took all of the courage that she possessed to place herself in its path.

At the last instant, the monolithic thing identified itself to Jalian with a force that burned itself into the deepest recesses of her mind.

destiny

/impact./

719 A.B.C.

When Jalian was fourteen years old, she became a full Huntress, easily the youngest in the clan. Seven years had seen changes in clan custom, the changes in custom accompanied with changes in leadership. Ralesh was Eldest Huntress, and the passing-over ceremony now consisted of a successful trip to an alternate timeline. Previously, before being declared full Huntress, the young female Silver-Eyes was required to leave the clan and not return until she had the scalps of at least three Real Indians.

That was no longer possible. After several years of technical civilization—read "guns"—there were no more Real Indians for the Silver-Eyes to worry about.

On Jalian's first trip outtime she did little more than show that she could successfully operate a Doorway, and was capable of selecting safe timelines from the readings the instruments gave. After the ceremony she went to see ghess'Rith.

Ghess'Rith was at the Ship, which the alien gods had moved to the clearing which held the Clan-House, many years ago. He was annoyed about something again, which did not surprise Jalian. Recently, ghess'Rith had taken it into his head that it was possible to teach the Silver-Eyes males to read and write. He had been trying to get the idea across to the Elder Huntresses, and had been meeting with a predictable lack of success. (Jalian held no opinion in the matter, one way or the other—except that *she* was not going to be the one to try to teach the stupid grunts.)

Ghess'Rith was reclining in his feathernest, a small, dim blue recess in the wall of one of the corridors of the Ship, when Jalian came to the Ship. She found him like that, his tentacles curling and uncurling with frustration, his lace stretched so tight that Jalian could hardly read expression in it. He brightened slightly when he saw Jalian, and made a cradle of tentacles for her to lie in.

/hello, ghess'Rith,/ said Jalian, settling herself comfortably in his tentacles.

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/hello, Jalian. how do you humans put up with each other?/

/don't insult my people,/ said Jalian cheerfully, /or i will be forced to cut off your tentacles one by one./

/you try it, brighteyes./ ghess'Rith paused, then said, /i almost did not remember. today was your test-for-adulthood. did you have the good sense to refrain from humiliating jin'Ish when cheshe tested you?/

Jalian giggled. /almost. asked her what a -entropy line was. cheshe evaded question./

/don't think cheshe knows,/ admitted ghess'Rith. /jin'Ish is only a technician. were you really curious, or just trimming cher tentacles?/

/mostly trimming cher tentacles, but some curious. i lost a probe on a -entropy line not three weeks ago. that probe cost Silver-Eyes two weeks of labor./

Ghess'Rith's lace relaxed slightly in acknowledgement. /-entropy lines are dangerous. that's one reason we use Silver-Eyes to hunt monopoles for us. we would *kesri* to be caught on a -entropy timeline./

Kesri, ghess'Rith?

/kesri id go, Jalian./

Jalian made a cutting gesture with one hand. /never mind. untranslatable, i think./

Two strands of ghess'Rith's lace tightened, and ghess'Rith forced air through them to produce the low humming sound that Jalian had come to associate with humor. /no doubt. like *guilt./*

Jalian nodded. /probably. what would happen to *me* if I were caught on a -entropy line?/

/you would die. i do not know if you would experience *kesri./*

/why would i die?/

/time runs backward, Jalian. that is what negative entropy means./

/i still do not understand./

/*your* entropy sign would still be positive. your neural system would quickly overload. the higher functions would go first, to be quickly followed by the gross physiological organs. within two running cycles you would have degenerated into . . . you have no words. very tiny pieces of basic matter. within five running cycles even those would be gone, converted into pieces of light./

/nobody ever survives it?/

Ghess'Rith's lace tightened. /some survive longer than others, great is their *kesri./*

/why?/

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/nobody knows./

[The author wishes to note that he has never liked ghess'Rith. But then, ghess'Rith has never liked him. I mean, me.]

1969 Gregorian.

The Huntress moved quietly, softly through the night. She walked forty meters from the edge of the freeway, well into the woods. She was not slowed by the undergrowth and the trees, and she left no path. None. Since she left the city, nobody had seen her.

In her right hand, there was a small device with a pointer and a lighted dial. Occasionally it spoke to her, in a quiet and strange language. She never answered it. Ralesh moved in the direction that the needle pointed. The needle, which was supposed to point in the direction of a disturbance between the walls of the world named Jalian, did not. It actually pointed toward a man named Georges Mordreaux, who was quite a different sort of a breach in the structure of the universe.

By now, of course, that was immaterial.

Clipped to the Huntress's belt was a small device that looked vaguely like a hand grenade, right next to the knife. The Huntress intended to kill Jalian, but she did not intend to use the knife.

That was for herself, afterward.

724 A.B.C.

When Jalian d'Arsennette was nineteen years old, she made the walk through the hills, to the Big Road, for the last time. Strapped to her back was a hideously heavy machine, nearly forty-five kilograms, that pushed her feet far into the ground and slowed her travel. The track that she left and the time that she lost were important; the other Huntresses, if they caught up with her before she reached the Big Road, would probably kill her. The machine strapped to her back had cost the Clan two years of labor.

It had been two weeks before that the alien gods had announced their intention to leave Earth. The Ship (which was, in fact, only a small part of a larger Ship that never left orbit) would lift silently into space with a full load of magnetic monopoles, enough so that the larger Ship could head out into the far deep, never to return.

Never to return.

Jalian had found ghess'Rith waiting for her, curled into a dim purplish mass of flesh, huddled sadly into his feathernest. Even the

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usual dim blue lighting was absent.

/ghess'Rith. you're leaving./

/true./

/why?/

/the Ship is ready to leave. i leave with it./

/you cannot stay here?/

/no./ Pause. /Jalian, you could come with us. you are better trained in outtime technology than many of the crew./

/no./

Ghess'Rith persisted. /Jalian, you will not be happy with nobody but other Silver-Eyes to talk to. *kisierin*, Jalian, there are no Silver-Eyes that you can mindtalk to./

/ghess'Rith, please./

/Jalian, there are wonders off of this small destroyed planet. within your own backyard there is a planet with brilliantly colored rings. one of your planets has a giant red spot which is caused by the dance of vast leviathans, celebrating the joy of creation. there are . . . Jalian, do you remember how you used to feel about what you called the Big Road?/

Jalian was silent for a long while, and then she sighed. "Yes, ghess'Rith. I remember."

/i do not understand what you just said, Jalian, but i felt you agree. Jalian, the rest of spacetime holds wonders that dwarf even what you used to feel of the Big Road./

Jalian said quietly, "I am not a child, ghess'Rith."

/i did not understand that, Jalian./

/you were not meant to./

/Jalian?/

"Oh, I remember the Big Road, ghess'Rith. I remember."

Jalian stepped onto the concrete of the Big Road with the same shiver that she always felt, even now that she knew what lay at its other end. That arrow-straight line, stretching away to infinity; even at nineteen, Jalian had traversed its length only three times.

The first three times, the land of gods and demons had not been at the other end.

Jalian had never found four to be a particularly lucky number for her, either way.

Jalian knelt down on the concrete of the Big Road, and slowly lifted the the Doorway off of her back. She set it down with a slight thud. She assembled the Doorway carefully, all too well aware of the time that it was taking her. Sweat began to stain her tunic in

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the ossifyingly dry and hot air.

After several minutes, the Doorway's control panel was set up and hooked to the Doorway itself. Using a tool that resembled a small awl, she began setting the controls as she had been taught. The work went slowly, as the awl-like tool was a poor substitute for the tentacles of the alien gods. Finally it was finished; and Jalian straightened, wiping sweaty palms on her white tunic, ignoring the sharp pain in her back.

Silently, the control panel acknowledged the search pattern Jalian had set up, and began sending probes through the alternate worlds until it reached one that caused it to flash the red "danger" unit that had been installed in the control panel because the Silver-Eyes could not hear the ultrasonic warning tone. Jalian moved quickly then, as the unit was running off its battery; and Jalian knew that even the holding pattern that the machine had stopped in was almost too much for the battery to sustain. If she was to make it quickly enough, she had to hurry. She disengaged the call-back remote and carefully destroyed the present-time call-back switch. The call-back remote would do her little good, this time; but she did not wish to leave it where the followers could use it.

Jalian looked up then, out toward the hills. She reached out with her mind to find the pursuit . . . there. Guided by her mind's eye, she could now visually make out the very faint cloud of dust that her followers, careless in their haste, were leaving.

She turned quickly away from the sight, knelt again, and set the unit to running.

The unit began whooping wildly at the very limits of Jalian's hearing as the Doorway suddenly penetrated into the universe with the skewed timeline. The Doorway, erected inside a huge metal frame, flickered, and then suddenly presented through its metal gateway a view of the Big Road, with every color switched around, with left turned to right; as she watched, a bird on the other side of the Doorway sailed gracefully backward across her field of vision.

Jalian hesitated only a second, a fraction of a second, and the Doorway, pulling incredible amounts of power from the unit's battery, began to flicker again.

Jalian stepped through the Doorway.

She was hit by incredible agony. She straightened slowly, in a strange and bizarre world where everything was wrong and pain was a fire that ran across her skin and through her lungs and pierced like a knife through her eyes and deep into her brain . . .

The Big Road stretched away in front of her. Jalian oriented on

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the familiar sight and slowly began the long run that would take her to its end.

Behind her, the Doorway flickered again.

1962 Gregorian.

A single car sped along the deserted highway, its four occupants more than sufficiently drunk. The driver was a seventeen-year-old boy who was better at driving drunk than he should have been.

They were quite drunk enough to doubt their eyes when the rainbows began to wash over the car. The driver slammed on the brakes, and the car skidded, hit the guard-rail at the side of the highway, and tumbled end over end. One of the headlights was smashed in the tumble, and the windshield shattered inward. When the car came to a rest, upside down in the middle of the road, the horn was blaring crazily and the single headlight was rocking up and down with the movement of the car.

The light intensified suddenly, the rainbows burning the eyes from the one girl still alive in the car, blinding her for what little was left of her life.

When the rainbows were gone, in the now seemingly-dim beam from the one rocking headlight, there was a tall, silver-eyed girl standing in the middle of the freeway, a small device in her right hand. She wore a white tunic, and her hair was ice-white.

She held the pose a second and then sagged to the ground, like a wind instrument without the wind.

724 A.B.C.

/of the female human, Jalian d'Arsennette/
/?/
/gene complex; examine/
/examined. import?/
/she entered a -entropy universe, two running cycles past/
/aware/
/her gene chart suggests that she may have survived the experience/
/!/
/agreed. what action?/
/where did she exit -entropy timeline?/
/suspected exit point before the Crunch/
/time of the Big Roads/
/affirmative/
/observed probability stresses?/

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/minimal, but definite. possibility of growth cycle, 6% running/
/new timelines?/
/affirmative/
/disastrous!/
/agreed—note Jalian d'Arsennette *your* pet/
/responsibility accepted/
/what action?/
/similar gene-complexes, other Silver-Eyes?/
/unknown. likelies?/
/Ralesh, Morine. otherwise unknown. strongly suspect Ralesh/
/.0063% probability Morine will survive/
/leaving Ralesh/
/yes/
/send her. and . . . /
/ghess'Rith?/
/knowing Jalian. transformation wavefront could be on way *now*./
/?/
/hurry/
/affirmative/

"Ralesh," said the alien machine, speaking to Ralesh in a voice that Ralesh was by now altogether weary of, "we must talk to you about your daughter."

1969 Gregorian.

Walking into the setting sun, cars speeding by at distances of less than a meter, discussing time and freeways and chocolate milk.

Jalian liked chocolate milk.

A faint sound hung in the air. It was harsh and martial, and seemed to be at a level just below that of conscious perception. Neither Jalian nor Georges was quite aware of it.

The freeway hugged the cliffs tightly at this point, and the wind was brisk. The sound of the waves, below, smashing into the cliffs, was all but inaudible. It was a thirty-meter drop to the rocks; there was no beach.

"Chocolate milk," said Jalian, and after a moment, she added, "and peanut butter cookies. That's what I like best about now."

"Speaking of which," said Georges, "let's get something to eat." Up ahead in a widened area of the freeway, set to the side of the road away from the cliff, there was a dingy-looking 7-11.

The 7-11 was empty of customers when they entered. Jalian

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glanced in distaste at the small bells that tinkled when they entered, thinking to herself that people who needed bells to know when someone had entered a room were even less to be worried about than a Real Indian.

(Jalian had been amused to find out that the Real Indians weren't, particularly. They were part Mexican, part Caucasian.)

Inside, Georges crossed to the refrigerated section and began rummaging inside. In the parking lot outside, a truckload full of locals pulled up. The evening attendant in the 7-11, a thin, hypertense young man with a bulging Adam's apple, muttered, "Oh, shit."

Jalian stood near the counter while Georges shopped, her hand near her knife, a cautious, watchful expression in her eyes.

/i don't like these lights, Georges,/ she said silently, as the group of six farmhands rolled through the double doors. /their color is wrong./

The thin attendant was trying to hide behind the counter, unsuccessfully. One of the new arrivals, a tall, rather handsome redhead in faded jeans and a brown-and-red plaid shirt, said cheerfully, "Hey, Charlie! How's it goin'?"

Charlie, the attendant, smiled weakly. "Pretty good, Stan. Can I help you?"

Stan didn't answer. He was looking at Jalian, grinning lightly. "Well, well, Charlie. This one of your many girlfriends, hey? Allow me to introduce myself, dear," he said to Jalian. "I am Stanley Mildwood, and yourself. . . ?"

Jalian glanced sideways at the burly redhead, then returned her gaze to the almost invisible spot on the plate-glass window where it had been resting. Indifferently, she said, "If you touch me, I will kill you."

One of the other men, who had just returned from the cold drinks section with three six-packs of Bud piled in his arms, giggled, an incongruously high-pitched sound. "Better be careful, Stan. She looks dangerous."

Stan's grin broadened, and he stepped closer to Jalian. "Oh, very dangerous . . ." He froze in place, an exquisitely well-honed blade edging a red line into his throat.

Georges walked over to the cash register, ignoring the tableau to his side, his arms filled with high-quality trash. "Mind ringing this up for me?" he asked the attendant.

Two of the farm hands that had entered with Stanley produced knives, silently. They began to encircle Georges, Jalian, and Stanley.

Jalian edged the blade slightly harder into Stanley's throat. "He

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dies first," she said in tones of ultimate boredom.

Georges turned about to survey the scene, as though seeing it for the first time. "Oh, my," he said, in tones of mild surprise. He looked at the five who were enclosing himself and Jalian. "You are very healthy boys, aren't you?"

For a second nothing happened; then the two holding the knives began to tremble. "Very, very healthy," continued Georges cheerfully. "Why . . ."

The knife-holders collapsed. Georges turned slightly to look at Stanley. "And you, Stanley Mildwood, you have an excellent memory."

The tall redhead blinked once, then opened his mouth as though to speak. "I . . .I . . ." He closed his eyes then, and began giggling hard. "Oh, God, but that's funny." He clutched his stomach and sank to the floor, the giggles getting louder and harder to control. "Oh, *Jesus* . . ."

Georges picked up the packages and, neglecting to pay for them, began stuffing them into a bag. The three left standing stirred slightly, as though they might be thinking about doing something, and Georges said imperturbably, "I have been known to get annoyed, on occasion."

They reconsidered and retreated. Backing out through the double doors, Jalian heard the music. It was louder now, loud enough for her to recognize it.

She froze in place for the space of several heartbeats, then said, through a mouth that was very dry and refused to work, "Georges."

"Hmm?"

"That music."

Georges listened a second, then nodded. "Yes?"

"The *arreyaho*, Georges. My clan . . .we play it before entering battle to the death. It means that there will be no quarter asked, none given." She turned to Georges, her eyes wide. "Georges, there are ken Selvren out there. Silver-Eyes."

Georges replied without thinking. "There can't be. If . . ." He saw the expression on Jalian's face and broke off. "So let's check." He turned on his heel and strode for the double doors.

Too late, Jalian screamed, "*Georges, no,*" and it echoed, /Georges, no./

Georges stepped outside.

A fluorescent light tube, which had been burnt out for the last week, flickered and began to glow.

The sun set.

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A knife flashed out of the darkness, and buried itself to the hilt in Georges' throat. He sank to the ground limply, quite without his customary grace.

The window of the 7-11 shattered outward, and Jalian d'Arsennette y ken Selvren came through with the shower of glass, her knife in hand. She came rolling to her feet, bits of glass in her hair and skin and clothing, with her knife raised to the sky. "I call challenge! I call battle to the death! Murderers, *cowards!*" She screamed the words again, "*I call challenge!*"

Quietly, without any sound audible to Jalian's ears, a figure stepped into the circle of light cast by the 7-11. The figure was garbed in the ceremonial dress of Clan Silver-Eyes, and she was easily identifiable.

The anger drained from Jalian. "Ralesh." The knife dropped to her side.

Jalian's mother nodded. "I . . . Jalian, your hair is white . . . but you are not old."

"It happened when I ran the Big Road. How did you survive it?" Jalian took a step closer to Ralesh.

"Almost, I did not." In the dim light, Jalian could see that her mother was worn, tired, but she seemed no older than the day Jalian had last seen her. In her right hand, there was an object that resembled a hand grenade.

Vague buzzing in his ears. Oddly, there was a cricket near Georges' right ear, which he could hear perfectly, cheep, cheep, *cheep*, damnit.

Discontinuity. Georges remembered the time he had had his head cut off. It had been more pleasant than this. All that he had remembered was a moment of fear, and then waking up with the corporal looking at him as though he had returned from the dead. (Ho.) But that bastard German soldier, inconsiderate though he'd been, at least he hadn't left the bayonet *in* Georges.

Again, discontinuity.

The cricket was starting to get on Georges' nerves.

Jalian saw Georges move. Out of the corner of her left eye, she saw Georges' hand creeping up through the dirt toward his neck and the knife. She tried to let no expression show on her face.

Ralesh froze. She had been saying something to Jalian, something about a dissolution of timelines, and oscillating cycles, that she did not really understand herself—when Jalian became very still.

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"What are you doing, daughter?" She keyed the object in her hand the way the gods had taught her.

Jalian circled to her right, flowing smoothly into a fighting crouch as she did so, desperately willing Ralesh to keep her eyes on Jalian. "Mother, it has been six years since I walked the Big Road. I am in my prime, and you are an old woman, well past yours. Do you think I cannot put my knife in your breast before you throw that thing?"

Ralesh shook her head no, slowly, her eyes locked to Jalian's. "No, daughter, I do not. Do you think that you can kill me and prevent this from going off as well? If it leaves my hand, it acts. It is only the pressure that I hold it with that prevents it from doing what it does, now."

"What alternative?" Jalian held the knife ready for an underhanded throw, hard at the thing in Ralesh's hand.

Ralesh still stood tall, not in fighting position. "Jalian, you do not understand. This thing will not kill you."

The hand was working the knife from the throat of Georges Mordreaux. "What, then, will it do?"

If I survive this experience, thought Georges grimly, *I am going to kill that God-forsaken cricket.*

A second later, it occurred to Georges: *There are probably less pleasant things to do in life (Ho) than pulling a knife from one's throat.*

It was the hardest thing that Georges had ever done in his long life to remain silent.

"Exile you." Ralesh spoke the words with obvious reluctance. "Cast you into an alternate universe far from here, one where the entropy sign is only slightly different from that here. You will be in constant agony even if you do manage to survive."

"I *repeat,*" said Jalian tensely, "*what alternative?*"

Ralesh's voice broke for the first time. "Honor—honorable death. Jalian, *please.*" It was the voice of a mother in pain, speaking to her only child. "*Jalian, do not make me do this . . .*"

Then Georges rolled over onto his back.

Tableau: In the dirt parking lot of a small, grimy 7-11 in northern California, in the year 1969, there are three humans. Unusual humans, perhaps—two have yet to be born, one has yet to die properly—but definitely human, with hands and feet and that stuff in the right places.

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Two of the humans are standing, females with silver eyes. One has white hair because of age, and the other, because of ages. The elder has, in her right hand, a small device that will, for lack of a better name, be called a hand-grenade-thingy. The other female has, in her right hand, a knife, poised for an underhand throw.

The male is lying on his back, a faintly gaping gash in his throat at two spots, with the knife that gaped them in his left hand.

Break tableau.

Georges got to his feet, slowly, eternity dripping by as he moved, neither of the silver-eyed elves moving.

Ralesh said, softly, "You're dead."

Georges heard the words clearly, but had no idea what they meant. He took a step toward her, and she backed away ever so slightly.

At almost exactly the same instant then, Jalian and Ralesh *moved*, with a speed that stunned Georges.

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Jalian's knife blurred toward's Ralesh's right hand . . .

Ralesh twisted to the side, dropping slightly, and threw the heavy metallic thing at Jalian from the side.

Jalian's knife caught Ralesh in the solar plexus, and sank to the hilt.

Georges tripped directly into the path of the metallic almost-hand-grenade, which had begun to glow with a soft pearly light the instant Ralesh let it go.

Georges found himself sitting on the ground, rather surprised to have the glowing hand-grenade-thingy in his hands.

The glow started to get very, very bright.

A quarter of a kilometer away, on the highway, a passing motorist noticed a faint, pearly glow coming from the road up ahead of him. Georges struggled to his feet.

He stood there, in the middle of the dirt parking lot, as though hypnotized, staring into the light that he held cupped in his hands.

Over the seven closest timelines—three in one temporal direction, four in the other—there existed a man named Georges Mordreaux, who had a talent.

There were other timelines where a man named Georges Mordreaux had existed, but in those he had not had a talent, and he was long dead. Farther away, he had never existed.

On the other seven timelines, seven Georges Mordreauxs dropped—in two cases, literally—whatever they were doing at the moment, and got a very far-away look on their collective face. Something Important was Happening.

Georges stared into the glowing white thing that he held. He felt the device straining with all of the might that it held to shift him elsewhere . . . he pushed back, lightly, to see what response there was; and the glow grew brighter, much, much brighter; and ships out at sea noticed a bright spot along the coast.

The nature of the thing . . . very, very entropic. Georges stared into the blinding light, feeling his way along its nature, pressing lightly, here, there, and judging the responses it made . . .

I disapprove of you, said Georges silently, and the device made no response, burning itself into lifelessness trying to shift this temporally massive object named Georges outward.

Reality began to flicker, wavering around Georges, and he there, and not there, a calm figure in the midst of a flickering burning fire that lit the sky of the night like a dozen suns.

This thing is very entropic, thought Georges at one eternity.

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Georges disapproved of entropy.

A blazing shaft of light climbed into the night sky, blasting upward from where Georges Mordreaux stood, burning through the atmosphere, and out past the moon, leaving a wash of flame across its surface, and still Georges stood calmly, balancing on the edge of the blade that was reality.

At the very height of the battle, when reality was rended into very small pieces, one here, one there, a little off to the side, Georges reached out and touched himself and energy poured into himself from seven Others, and then . . .

Eight universes converged, like eight infinitely fine planes melding together into a single sheet of purest, finest crystal, inside the body of Georges Mordreaux.

It stopped.

Georges stood there, in the black darkness of the partial moon, quite blind; his hands opened to the bone by the melting metal.

Sometime during the event, Ralesh had died.

2719 Gregorian.

When the alien gods came to Earth, sometime in the twenty-eighth century, they were met by patrol ships near the outer boundary of the Solar System, at the very edge of the cometary belt.

The patrol ships, as nearly as the alien gods could tell, were quite unarmed. This pleased them immensely, and then some idiot technician went and pointed out that *their* weapons weren't working. Then they became quite apprehensive. They were escorted inward, toward the third planet of the system. The planet had a moon—almost a double planet—and the moon was scarred badly, as though in some ferocious war. The alien gods grew downright frightened, then.

The third planet was ringed by an artificial ring, hooked to the planet at five points by sky-hooks. The alien gods were impressed.

And, what the Hell; eventually they met the person that ran things thereabouts, and had most of their apprehensions removed, although they also picked up a few new ones to add to the old. Or, so to speak . . .

Georges Mordreaux smiled when the alien gods were brought in to him, and offered them standing places in front of his desk.

The smile was the sort of smile that eight people rolled into one might smile. It dazzled.

At his side, there stood a female human named Jalian d'Arsennette.

/greetings be,/ said Jalian d'Arsennette.

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The alien gods froze in shock. The one known as ghess'Rith said, after a moment, /identifying selves?/

/certainly,/ said Georges, and his mindvoice echoed. /i am Georges Mordreaux, and this is Jalian d'Arsennette y ken Selvren./

/register; non-comprehension/

Jalian spoke vocally. "Computer."

I activated my remotes in the room. "*Yes?*"

"Don't be impatient," she said gently. "Do you have the feather-nests ready for our guests?"

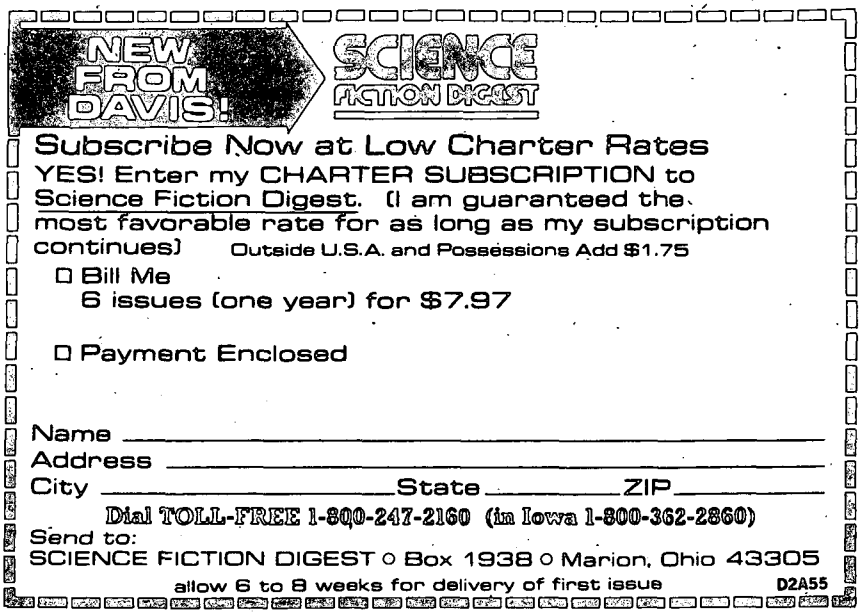
"Of *course*," I said impatiently. "What do you think I am, some faulty biological *animal?*"

"I've *got* to reprogram that bloody thing to be more polite," muttered Georges under his breath.

"You try it, bucko," I said smugly. "You just try it."

/*non-comprehension*/

/calming be,/ said Georges. /all will be explained. we have . . . all the time in the world./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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR
by Erwin S. Strauss

A chance is coming up shortly to meet the Good Doctor in person. Make your plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped evelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number and I'll call back at my expense. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning, give your name and reason for calling right away. Find me behind the Filthy Pierre badge at cons.

NasfaCon. For info, write: **550 Finch Ave W., Willowdale, Ont. M2R 1N6, Canada.** Or phone: **(416) 924-8084** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Toronto, Ont. (if city omitted, same as in address) on: 17 Apr., 1982. Guests will include: Phyllis ("Sunburst") Gottlieb, T. M. Green, A. Weiner, J. ("Other Canadas") Colombo, J.F. Roy, R. Priest, Capt. George Henderson.

High Plains. Quality Inn, Amarillo TX. 16-18 Apr. The delayed renewal of this Panhandle convention.

AprilCon. Ferris Booth Hall, Columb. U., New York NY. 17 Apr. T. M. ("Camp Concentration") Disch.

Contretemps. New Tower Inn, Omaha NE. 23-25 Apr. Pat & Lee (Shree) Killough, R. Asprin, Donaldson.

MarCon, Box 2583, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 497-9953. 30 Apr.-2 May. Hal ("Mission of Gravity") Clement, the Coulsons. One of the main Midwestern cons, carrying on the convivial traditions.

Colorado MountainCon, c/o Gardner, CMC, Leadville CO 80461. (303) 486-2018. 1-2 May. C. J. (Faded Sun) Cherryh, Ed Bryant, Real Musgrave, Reuben Fox, Michael & Lynne Goodwin. Masquerade.

Kubla Kahn, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220 (615) 832-8402. 7-9 May. "Midnite Maskeraid."

UniCon 5425 N. Indiana, Kansas City MO 64119. 8-9 May. Pat & Lee (Shree) Killough, David Houston, David E. Martin, Robert Chilson, Thomas Blackshear. Not connected with others cons named UniCon.

LepreCon, Box 14500, Phoenix AZ 85063. (602) 278-1827. 14-16 May. Artists George Barr, W. Rotsler.

TexarKon, Box 6643, Texarkana TX 75501. 14-16 May. Gordon R. (Dorsai) Dickson. Artist Kelly & Polly Freas, Robert (Mythconceptions) Asprin, Margaret Middleton. Masquerade and banquet.

SkyCon, c/o Howard, Super Giant, 38 Wall, Asheville NC 28801. 15-16 May. Hal ("Needle") Clement.

VCon, Box 48701, Sta. Bentall, Vancouver, BC V7X 1A6, Canada. 21-23 May. Ben ("Colony") Bova.

SwampCon, c/o BRSFL, Box 18610-A, Baton Rouge LA 70893. 29-30 May. The third annual edition here.

SF Con, 337 Harford Rd., Syracuse NY 13208. (315) 454-3020. 18-20 Jun. J. O. Jeppson MD, I*S*A*A*C A*S*I*M*O*V, Peg & Pat Kennedy. In the previous four years, this event was called "Conebulus."

ElectraCon, Box 1052, Kearney NE 68847. (308) 324-2449. 18-20 Jun. W. A. ("Ice and Iron") Tucker, Ed Bryant, Mike Kennedy, S. Gray. Masquerade. The Central Nebraska con returns for a second year.

Torque, 1812-415 Willowdale Ave., Willowdale, Ont. M2R 5B4, Canada. Toronto, Ont., 21-23 Jun. Sam ("Dhalgren") Delany, R. Reynolds, D. D'Amassa. Now at Seaway Hotel. "Word-oriented" (vs. media).

WesterCon, Box 11644, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 249-2616. 2-5 Jul. Gordon (Dorsai) Dickson, D. ("Man Who Folded Himself") Gerrold, Fran Skene. The big Western regional con at the 1978 WorldCon site.

ChiCon IV, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690. 2-6 Sep., 1982. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 World SF Con. Go to smaller cons to prepare yourself for WorldCons.

ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203. 1-5 Sep., 1983. John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Join WorldCons early as possible to miss rate hikes.

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LETTERS

IMPORTANT NOTICE!!!

All manuscripts, letters to the editor and requests for format sheets and writer's guidelines should henceforward be sent to: Editor, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Subscription mail still goes to the old address: PO Box 1933, Marion OH 43305. Any other queries, such as advertising, distribution, etc., should be sent to the appropriate department at the above Davis Publications address. Thank you for your cooperation.

Dear Editors:

I do not expect literary excellence from your magazine; I only expect entertainment. Still, I am not too surprised when I do discover excellence among the entertainment, and I want to encourage you to continue printing high-quality entertainment by thanking you for it.

I am moved to write by a particular work, the poem by Jon P. Ogden, "I Ain't Too Dumb To Care" (October 26, 1981). Everyone knows the special feeling, impossible to adequately describe, of finding some writing that touches deep inside. Maybe Gaston Bachelard comes closest to describing that feeling in his book, *The Poetics of Space,* when he speaks about the phenomenon of "reverberation." Ogden's poem surely reverberated in my mind, the first time I read it and the tenth, and probably forever.

I do not read new poetry in general, and I'm sure I would have missed this poem if you had not printed it. Again, thanks, and my personal thanks to Jon P. Ogden for creating this beautiful new image based on an old favorite.

Sincerely,

Salina N. Watson
310 L Street
N. Wilkesboro NC 28659

From now on, expect literary excellence, too. I assure you our writers strive for it. We urge them to.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Editors:

I decided to sit down and write to you folks while the story "Lirios" by Mr. Tiptree Jr. is still in mind. It was beautifully done, exquisite and not to be forgotten. I enjoy fantasy very much. To me, fantasy is the bizarre moments of reality that happen to us daily if we but take a look around us.

I have never been much of a reader of short stories, in fact have in the past avoided them like the plague. Short stories are simply *too* short. I only become interested in the characters when the story is finished and I'm left wanting more.

This is how I felt a year ago before I accidentally got my hands on one of your magazines. Being a compulsive reader, I took a chance and read several of the stories and found myself reading on. I can't say that I enjoy *all* of the stories and articles, but I do enjoy enough of them to order a subscription to your magazine. Keep up the good work.

M. J. Bennett
Earlville NY

We'll settle for enough liking for a subscription. And who knows? As you continue reading short stories, you may get to like them. You may even become a short story junkie. Stranger things have happened.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs and Madame:

I seldom (never) take time to write to a magazine but your November 23 issue has, for some obscure reason, inspired me to do so.

I am sure you will receive many epistles commenting on a story as fine as David Brin's "Loom Of Thessaly." I found it a delightful blend of two pet hobbies of mine—history and mythology. It is as well written a modern myth as I have ever been privileged to read, being both logical and, in a fictional sense, believable.

John M. Ford's "Waiting For The Morning Bird" was also a delectable piece of work. Anyone who possesses even a smattering of imagination has a few metaphorical phrends (yes PHrends). I myself have several, the oldest of which has been with me since the tender age of three.

As a whole I find your magazine excellent, not above reproach, but excellent just the same. I shall keep my criticisms to myself as most, if not all, of my 'bones of contention' have already been addressed in these pages.

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I am a confirmed fan of the good doctor's (or is it Good Doctor's?) even though I do not always agree with the opinions he expresses. I know better than to attempt to debate my pet peeves with Dr. Asimov here where he is privileged to have the last words.

Thank you for an enjoyable oasis in the vast magazine wastelands. Please find enclosed the required S.A.S.E. for a copy of your story needs. I feel an urge to add a few contributions from you to my growing collection of rejection slips.

Galactically yours,

Celeste Lusko
Box 53
Hanksville UT 84734

The reason's not obscure at all. You like *us, which is a tribute to your amiability and good sense.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs,

Please, buy more D. D. Storm! His (or her, who can tell with initials) story, "Mud/Aurora," in the November 23, 1981 issue, was, in a word, wonderful. While I enjoyed every story in that issue, I thought his (or hers) was outstanding. Coming in a close second, though, was Kate Wilhelm's "With Thimbles, With Forks and Hope." I, for one, would like to see more stories of the SF/Mystery type.

Also, being from Oklahoma, right in the middle of the Bible Belt (which makes a few of us want to take a belt), I appreciated Dr. Asimov's editorial. The Moral Majority being so strong here, and there being more evangelists than you can shake a hymnal at in this state, I believe you can look for a "scientific creationist" law being passed here early in 1982. It may soon be up to parents in Oklahoma and surrounding states to teach their children of evolution. I just hope that in a few years we can come out from under the thumb of the friendly fascists of the Moral Majority.

At any rate, back to SF. I do wish you would sprinkle a few more action pieces into your magazine. While I do enjoy a thought-provoking story more, I also like to set my blood racing now and again.

IA'sfm is an excellent magazine and I intend to read it for as long as it is published. In other words, I think the last ish of your mag was fab! (I've always wanted to say that.)

Sam J. Owen
1140 E. 61 St. #41
Tulsa OK 74136

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As a specialist in SF/Mystery myself, would I do anything to discourage such stories? They are difficult to write, though.

—Isaac Asimov

To the Good Doctor A and all other *IA'sfm* gentlepersons,

I've never written to you before, but I feel compelled to write after reading your Nov. 23 editorial "Watch Out!" I, too, am frightened by the attempts of a misguided but dangerous few fundamentalists to undermine the validity of science and technology in our society. But please know, Dr. Asimov, that not all Christians feel this way! I've been an avid science fiction fan ever since I could read; I've read all your books (most of them twice), and devour your magazine from cover to cover every month. I'm also a Christian, and some of the actions of those who call themselves Christians disgust me.

Science is a discipline based on objective facts; belief is a private, subjective experience. The teaching of evolution in no way threatens a belief in God or even belief in the usefulness of the Bible. The Biblical view of creation should not be taught in a science class, for it is not science. Period.

It is man's ability that, in part, makes him so unique among the creatures of the world. Some of us believe that God teaches us to keep an open mind and use our minds to their full capabilities. God has given men the capacity to think, to reason, to explore, to discover. As a graduate student in computer science and engineering at Case Institute of Technology with an undergraduate degree in math, I am certainly trying to improve my knowledge of science and how to use it to benefit others.

I'm not trying to apologize for fundamentalists who try to legislate their misinformed views on everyone. These people do more damage to Christianity than any other group. However, *please* don't equate a belief in God and Christ with ignorance and narrow-mindedness. I will buy and read your magazine until I die or you go out of business, whichever comes first. I just want you to know that at least one Christian is on your side.

Sincerely,

Jamie Doll
Shaker Heights OH

I assure you I know, and have stated in print, that there are many sincere religionists of all kinds who accept modern science and see no conflict between the essence of religion and the attempts of science

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to describe and understand the Universe. I only wish that these religionists would strike out more strongly against the perversion of religion by the literalists.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

The past ten or fifteen years have been sad ones for a dedicated, old-fashioned SF reader. So much money wasted on so much boring *stuff*. Then a miracle happened with the November issue of *IA'sfm*—a real bonanza! I promise now that I will go back through all earlier issues with a less cavalier attitude, in hopes of finding other overlooked nuggets.

First, "The Loom of Thessaly." Super great! It is an absolutely flawless and inspired story. I have added it to my card file of favorite stories and it shares a double plus rating with only three others: "Nightfall," "Forgetfulness," and "Flowers for Algernon." Would that we *could* eliminate Clotho and Atropos and let Lachesis weave for us the kind of world we wish we had. The illustration is beautiful too.

Next, "Mud/Aurora." Also excellent. A thought-provoking study of the twin problems of communication and alienation.

Last and least but very funny, "Without (General) Issue."

I'm not a writer but I'm very curious about almost everything. Would you mind sending me your sheet on format and story requirements? [Not in the least. Sent.]

Since this is my very first "fan" letter, I may as well go all the way and include a kind of pseudo-haiku I wrote for Dr. I. A. To wit:

Earth for his playground,
sparkling galaxies his toys—
Oh! the fun he has!

Sincerely,

Lucille M. Chitwood
Santa Cruz CA

Thank you! It is fun, and for the readers, too, I hope.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

For the most part, your new format is an improvement. The framed appearance gives a much cleaner look to your cover. I, however,

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must agree with Robert Nowall in that the cover illustrations are decidedly worse.

The cover on the issue that contained your editorial, "Magazine Covers," (September 28, 1981) is a perfect example. It is a silvery sphere on a pink background. Which story does it illustrate? None of them. What is it for? Nothing appearent. What is it? Unknown. Most of all, what is it doing on the cover of my favorite magazine? (You answer that one.)

The problem with the illustrations is simple: they are *dull*. In your editorial, you say that the covers are "less directly illustrative and more symbolic." Please! More directly illustrative and less symbolic!

One other problem is the large, boldface interior titles. Instead of giving the title of the story, they are SCREAMING it. You should go back to the old titles.

Sincerely yours,

Alan Hamilton
2501 W. Dunlap Ave.
Phoenix AZ 85021

For the most part, though, you say it's an improvement. Well, I'll comfort myself with that, and we'll see if we can't make it better still.

NEXT ISSUE

The June issue of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine will present the first-ever appearance of Damon Knight in these pages. While "Azimuth 1,2,3..." is perhaps not his most serious work, it's certainly one of his cleverest. Also in June are A. Bertram Chandler and Gene Wolfe as well as Isaac Asimov on the "plot" by SF writers to take over the world, Martin Gardner, and Baird Searles on books. On sale May 11, 1982.

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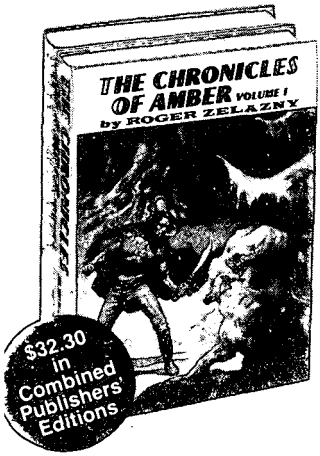

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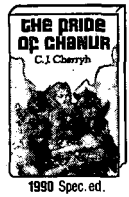

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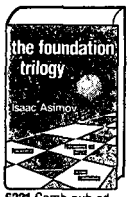

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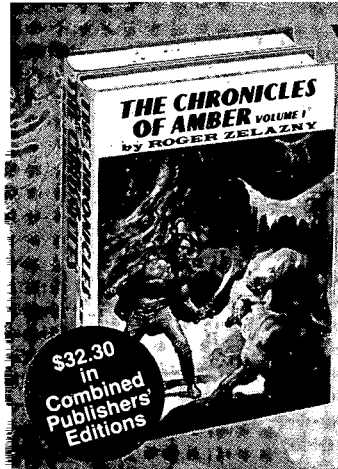

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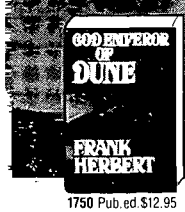

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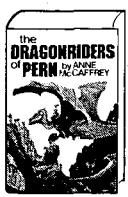

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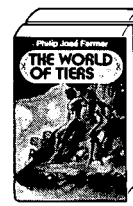

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